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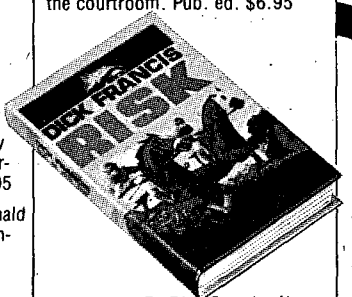

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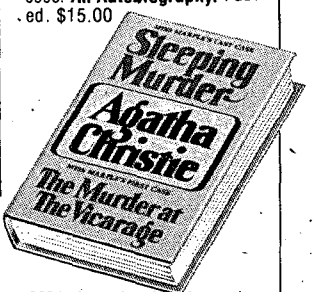

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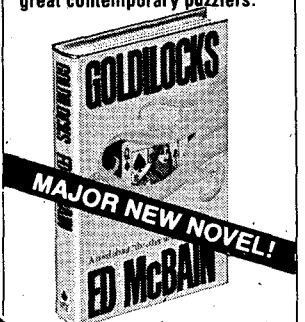

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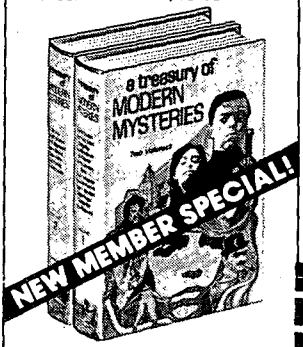

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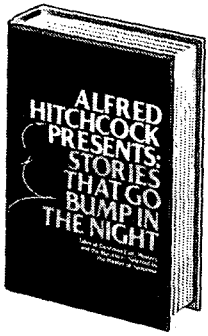

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THE MIDNIGHT STRANGLER

by JACK RITCHIE

I had been just about to enter my automobile when a half dozen flashlight beams were directed on my person and I was peremptorily admonished not to move or I would have my head blown off. In an instant more I was surrounded by at least 20 men, half of them in police uniform.

I realized that this was certainly not the proper time to argue, but I did pose a question. "Gentlemen, what is this all about?"

No one chose to answer. Instead I was thoroughly searched, handcuffed, and whisked into a waiting patrol car. In another moment we were off, sirens wailing, despite which it took us nearly fifteen minutes of threading our way through the congested evening traffic to reach police headquarters.

There I was pushed and pulled through a horde of what appeared to be newspaper reporters with questions, hustled into an elevator, and finally ushered into a small room on one of the upper floors.

A huge florid individual in mufti, who had been at my elbow throughout my journey, glared at his entourage. "How come I find all those reporters waiting downstairs? I'll bet one of you clowns phoned the papers ten seconds after we picked him up."

No one met his eyes and I thought I detected some anonymous shuffling of feet.

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"All right," he snapped. "Now all of you get the hell out of here and somebody find Sergeant Wiggins and tell him that we caught his Midnight Strangler. If he doesn't know already."

It was a bit warm in the room, so I reached into my topcoat pocket for a handkerchief with which to dab at my forehead. I found no handkerchief, but my fingers did close on a small card. I brought it out and discovered it was the business card of one Clarence Darrow Theobault. Attorney-at-law. Trial work.

Evidently the welcoming throng down below had included at least one lawyer who had taken the opportunity to slip his card into my pocket as I was being muscled through.

The huge man sat down on a chair opposite me. "I am Captain McGillicutty. Of Homicide."

I took off my topcoat and sat down. "I gather you are under the impression that I am the Midnight Strangler?"

McGillicutty allowed himself a tight smile. "So you *have* heard of him?"

"Of course."

And as I remembered, the Midnight Strangler had so far claimed seven victims, all of them men. The group had included a sociology professor, chiropractor, dentist, school bus driver, tool and die maker, sewer inspector, and linoleum layer—all of them between the ages of 46 and 54.

Actually the appellation Nine O'Clock Strangler would have been more apt, though not as catchy. All the victims seemed to have been pounced on by the strangler after they parked their automobiles for the evening in their respective driveways, garages, or breezeways, the deaths occurring between the hours of eight and ten. And on each of their foreheads there had been imprinted—apparently with a rubber stamp—the words, "Sinners must pay."

The door opened and a tall thin man whose expression indicated a headache, entered the room.

McGillicutty introduced him. "This is Sergeant Wiggins."

Wiggins regarded me curiously. "Has anybody read him his rights?"

McGillicutty thought about that. "Come to think of it, no. In all the excitement we forgot." He turned to me. "You have the right to remain silent. You have . . ." He faltered. "How does it go, Wiggins?"

"It's on that little celluloid card, Captain. The one we're sup-

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posed to carry on our persons at all times."

McGillicutty smiled patiently. "I haven't personally made an arrest in ten years and I don't know where my damn card is."

Wiggins handed his over and McGillicutty read the words. That over, he returned the card and said, "Well, do you want a lawyer?"

"I don't think that will be necessary."

Wiggins showed teeth. "Believe me, it will be necessary." He seemed rather happy about my situation. "Is there anything we can do to make you feel more comfortable? Care for a cigarette? Coffee? Can I hang up your topcoat? Should we send out for some sandwiches?"

I declined the food, drink, and cigarette, but handed him my topcoat, after first removing Theobault's card from the pocket. "Gentlemen, I am not your Midnight Strangler. My name is Henry Turnbuckle and I am a bonded licensed private detective based in Milwaukee, as you have no doubt ascertained from the credentials in my wallet."

Wiggins blinked. "Is that right, Captain? Is he a private detective?"

McGillicutty nodded. "That's what his wallet says. But I don't take that as a guarantee that he can't be the Midnight Strangler."

I examined Theobault's card once more. "I am utterly innocent and therefore do not require legal aid. However I am rather curious about what I could get. Would I be going wrong if I sought to retain a Clarence Darrow Theobault of your city? I believe that he's downstairs at this very moment."

McGillicutty scowled at the mention of the name. "All right, Wiggins, see if Theobault's downstairs. And he probably is. This is his kind of case."

Wiggins returned in ten minutes with a tall loping individual whose arms seemed a bit long for his body.

His large powerful hand enveloped mine in a pressure grip. "My name is Theobault. Clarence Darrow Theobault. Perhaps you've heard of me? I *do* hope you haven't told the police anything? And if you have it was undoubtedly under duress."

"So far I have had the opportunity to give hardly more than my name and occupation."

He rubbed his hands. "Excellent. Very clever and clear-headed of you." He turned to McGillicutty. "I would like to speak to my client alone."

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Theobault watched them leave and then regarded me with a somewhat sharkish smile.

"One moment," I said quickly. "I have not officially retained you as yet. Let us first establish that this is a preliminary conference and that it does not cost me one red cent."

"But of course, of course," Theobault said. "You are under no obligation."

"How much do you charge for defending a man accused of murder?"

He chuckled. "My dear sir, there are no set fees in matters like this. One cannot anticipate the expenses involved. My fees are elastic, but one must not really be concerned with mere money at a time like this. Your life is at stake. We must see that you receive at least a lengthy trial. By the way, what *is* your profession?"

"I am a private detective."

He gave that dubious thought. "You are the head of an agency? Or at least an executive in the firm?"

"No. I don't even have a secretary. Frankly, the private detecting business hasn't been going all that well. Maybe I should plead indigence and have the court appoint an attorney for me?"

He quickly closed the gap. "Nonsense, nonsense. All is not lost. This is much too important a case to entrust to some fledgling lawyer. We will come to some mutually acceptable monetary arrangement, I am sure. Now, we will plead not guilty by reason of insanity."

"But I am innocent. And sane."

"Of course you are. Of course." He sat down beside me and lowered his voice slightly. "Now, I don't want you to say a single word to any newspaper reporter, or to any writer for a magazine, and don't talk into anybody's tape recorder. Tell those people to come to me first. I'll be handling your affairs and we've got to keep exclusive rights. There's no point in handing out anything for free. We get a cut of all the action and that includes interviews, tapes, television, and the movies."

I frowned. "It was my understanding that a murderer is not allowed to profit from his crimes."

Theobault laughed lightly. "Of course a murderer is not allowed to profit from his crime. But, after all, he's got to have money if he wants to be defended by a competent, experienced attorney and that isn't *really* profiting from his crime, now is it? Besides, there

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are all kinds of technicalities involved. A *sane* murderer obviously shouldn't be allowed to profit from his crime. But does this hold true for an *insane* murderer? After all, can he be held responsible if somehow he picked up a buck or two? It's just something that happened to him. Like an act of God. Leave everything to me."

"Do you think you can get me an acquittal?"

He winced. "That would kill our movie sale. Who cares about the life story of an innocent man?"

There was a knock on the door and it opened. McGillicutty looked in. "Are you two through yet?"

I nodded. "I rather think so."

Theobault patted my shoulder. "Don't answer any questions unless I give you the nod."

McGillicutty and Wiggins brought a third man into the room. "This is Oscar Vandermeir."

Oscar Vandermeir was a hulking pot-bellied man with large baby-blue eyes. He stared at me curiously. "So this is the Midnight Strangler?"

McGillicutty nodded. "Have you ever seen him before?"

Vandermeir walked first to one side of me and then to the other. "Well, he's not one of my customers. Unless maybe he wore a beard. But actually he's not the type which comes into my store at all. Mostly they're late middle-age and ninety-nine percent of them are men. But what with this Women's Lib, who knows but what that might change. And usually they're single, though I suppose once in a while I get a married man."

Theobault spoke up. "Just who is this man and what does he have to do with the case against my client?"

McGillicutty smiled. "Mr. Vandermeir is the proprietor of the AAA Acme Adult Book Store. Perhaps you've heard of it, eh, Turnbuckle?" He turned back to Vandermeir. "All right, Oscar, tell them all about it."

"Well," Vandermeir said, "I'm not the type of person who goes to the police. Usually they come to me. Or at least they did a lot. But times change." He side-tracked in reminiscence. "In the old days I had to fill my store with those dusty second-hand books that were classics and so on. I kept the real stuff in the back room. And you never knew which customer might be a cop. I'd get arrested half a dozen times a year and my place was once shut down for sixty days. But things are different now. More honest. More sophisticated. No hypocrisy." His blue eyes were thoughtful.

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"Except maybe for the word adult."

McGillicutty prodded him back. "Get on with the story."

Vandermeir nodded. "Anyway, I don't read the papers much. All that print is bad for the eyes. But I heard people talk about the Midnight Strangler and so when he wipes out his fifth man, I get hold of a newspaper and lo and behold the picture on the front page is that of one of my best customers, though I don't know his name until I read it. My clientele don't usually volunteer names unless they want to get on a special mailing list.

"So I think, what a coincidence, and nothing more. Then comes the sixth murder and I see that I lost another good customer.

"But still two coincidences don't make enough coincidences for me to go to the cops. But I wait for number seven. And sure enough, again it's one of my regulars who's deep into flagellation among Transylvanians. So I decided that I ought to tell the police, even though they never done anything for me. And here at headquarters I look at pictures of all the other victims and I recognize all but two."

I rubbed my jaw. "Why would the strangler kill five people who were your customers and two who were not?"

Vandermeir shrugged. "I'm not saying those two weren't my customers. I'm just saying I didn't recognize them. A lot of my people feel that they got to wear false beards and mustaches and wear dark-green glasses."

"Ah, yes," I said wisely. "Apparently the strangler feels strongly about the kind of people who patronize adult bookstores and thus make them profitable to operate. He feels justified—possibly even cosmically called upon—to rid the world of sin. This particular kind, anyway."

McGillicutty regarded me pointedly. "Why didn't this strangler just kill Vandermeir and get it over with?"

I shrugged. "I rather suspect that he was saving Vandermeir as the *pièce de resistance*."

McGillicutty folded his arms. "We've had a stakeout on Vandermeir's store for two days now. We saw one of his customers come out of the store, and we saw you step out of a dark doorway and follow him."

"That was Homer Schleigel," I said.

"And who is Homer Schleigel?"

"Once a week, on Thursdays, Homer Schleigel goes bowling. Or he claims to. Only last week he forgot to take his bowling ball

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along. When he got back home at about eleven that night, his wife asked him how the bowling had gone, meaning to twit him on forgetting his ball and assuming that he had been forced to use one of the balls provided to the public by bowling alleys. He had said fine, fine, that he'd rolled a 600 series, and that the old ball was operating better than ever.

"His wife lapsed into silence and suspicion. The next day she phoned Hanlon's Pizza, which was the name on the back of her husband's bowling shirt, and discovered that Homer had quit the team some six months before. She would have followed him the next Thursday—which is today—except that they aren't a two-car family. So she hired me to find out what he's been up to."

I called to mind Homer's movements. "He left Milwaukee at six-thirty. It is a half an hour drive south to this city. He put his car in the Apex Parking Lot. He then walked to the Tivoli, where he saw *Deeper Esophagus,* which I understand is a sequel. At its conclusion he stopped in at Mac's Malt Shop for a pistachio sundae. He then resumed walking with a purpose, eventually entering Vandermeir's establishment. He did some extensive browsing and then made a few purchases. He returned to the Apex Parking Lot and reclaimed his auto. I was about to do the same for my vehicle and follow him when you people descended on me. Homer is probably back in Milwaukee by now."

Sergeant Wiggins had been listening hostilely. "I got no use for private detectives."

I sighed. "I had hoped to ride out this storm on my own strength, however I see that I do need help. Actually I am a member of the Milwaukee police department. I believe that should carry some weight. At the moment I am on educational leave. I am working on my masters degree and my subject is the function of the private detective in our society and it seemed to me that I could hardly learn more about the field than by becoming a private detective myself."

McGillicutty turned to Sergeant Wiggins. "Check that out."

Wiggins left the room and McGillicutty also excused Vandermeir.

He got back to me. "Just because you're a regular cop doesn't mean that you automatically can't be the strangler. We'll check you out and we'll check you out good."

My eyes had been drawn to my topcoat hanging on the wall peg. I distinctly remembered reaching into the right-hand pocket

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for a handkerchief, finding none, but instead finding Theobault's card. That pocket should now be empty, and yet there seemed to be a slight bulge there. It rather piqued my curiosity.

I rose and went to the coat. I slipped my hand into the pocket and it closed on an object. I pulled it out. It was a small rubber stamp. I tested it on the back of my hand and could just make out the faint words, "Sinners must pay."

"Well," I said accurately. "Well, *well.*"

McGillicutty had, of course, been watching me. So had Theobault. The latter rose to his feet. "Turnbuckle," he commanded. "Don't say another word."

"Shut up," McGillicutty said, and I rather agreed with him. McGillicutty and I sat down again, facing each other. McGillicutty began darkly to think.

"Captain," I said, "when I was arrested, I was thoroughly searched, was I not?"

He agreed reluctantly. "I searched you myself. No stamp." He sighed. "The strangler knew that we were watching the store. Hell, he probably saw us—there were enough of us scattered around. He saw us pick you up. He realized that if we were watching Vandermeir's store that we must have found the key to the string of murders. He decided he might as well call it quits. He also figured this was a good opportunity to nail the case down so that we wouldn't be looking for the strangler any more. He rushed over to the station, waited in the crowd, and while you were being hustled through he planted the stamp in your pocket. Just like Theobault planted the card."

McGillicutty eyed Theobault.

Theobault flushed. "I am not the strangler. All I slipped into Turnbuckle's pocket was my card." Nevertheless, he looked down at his huge hands and seemed to be trying to think them small.

"No, Captain," I said. "Theobault did not slip the stamp into my pocket. When I came into this room, I reached into that pocket for a handkerchief. I found no handkerchief, but I did find his card. However, *only* his card. No rubber stamp."

McGillicutty frowned. "You mean that the stamp was planted in your pocket *after* you got into this room?"

"That's right, Captain."

His eyes narrowed. "Are you saying that *I* planted that stamp in your coat?"

"No. I have been sitting here in this chair and the topcoat has

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been in my sight continuously. I know that you did not approach it."

"Vandermeir? He murders his own customers because he's got a guilt complex about how he makes his money?"

"No. Not Vandermeir either."

"Then who the hell else is there?"

"Captain, was Sergeant Wiggins on the stakeout at Vandermeir's store?"

"No, this was strictly a homicide show."

"Isn't Wiggins in Homicide?"

"No, he's with the vice squad. But naturally he's got an interest in the case and so I sent for him when I brought you in."

"Captain," I said, "the only person who touched my topcoat after I entered this room was Sergeant Wiggins when he so graciously hung it on that peg."

McGillicutty closed his eyes.

I nodded. "Wiggins was here at headquarters when you brought me in and he realized that this was a perfect opportunity to frame me and close the case. Evidently he didn't have the opportunity to slip the stamp into my pocket as I was being pushed through the crowd downstairs. Or he simply didn't have the stamp on him. But it must have been near somewhere, because between the time I arrived here at headquarters and the time he appeared in this room I doubt if he would have had time to drive home, retrieve the stamp, and return."

McGillicutty sighed. "He lives way out near the county line—at least an hour round trip. And he's been pretty upset about the new porno laws. And he's got those damn headaches all the time . . ."

"He was hoping I would be searched again as a matter of routine and the stamp found. Or he might have even planned to suggest another search himself."

I put the stamp back into the pocket of my topcoat and returned it to the wall peg. "However, I wager that now Wiggins will attempt to *un*frame me."

That got McGillicutty's attention. "Unframe?"

"Yes. Because it is one thing to frame a simple private detective for murder, but it is quite another to attempt to do the same to a legitimate policeman who has the rank of detective-sergeant and an unblemished record. Too many questions would be asked, there would be too much probing, and the truth would probably come

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out. No, Wiggins has to unframe me now."

"And how is he going to do that?"

"When he returns and sees that we have apparently not yet found the stamp, he will invent some reason for approaching my topcoat. He will surreptitiously remove the stamp."

Wiggins returned some five minutes later. "He's a cop all right, Captain. A detective-sergeant." Wiggins licked his lips. "Well, I suppose we'll just have to hand him his topcoat and let him go. Right? We all made a mistake." He moved to the topcoat and for perhaps two or three seconds his back effectively shielded it from our view.

He turned and brought me the coat.

McGillicutty and I studied the contours of Wiggins' suit and probably arrived at the mutual suspicion that the small bulge in the right side pocket of his suitcoat was now formed by a rubber stamp.

"Wiggins," McGillicutty said, "what is that bulge in your right-hand pocket?"

Wiggins did not look down. "Nothing, Captain. Nothing. Maybe my key ring or something."

McGillicutty was insistent. "Let's see it, Wiggins."

"Captain," I said. "When one finds a rubber stamp, can a stamp pad be far behind? You don't suppose that if we looked in his locker, or perhaps in his automobile, we might find a stamp pad and that if this stamp pad were subjected to laboratory scrutiny we might even find on this pad several vestigial impressions of the words, 'Sinners must pay'?"

Wiggins lost his color. "Damn you, nobody has the right to search my car." Then he stared at the revolver Captain McGillicutty had pointed at him and he pulled himself together. "I refuse to say another word until I see my lawyer."

Theobault rose and rubbed his huge hands. "If you don't mind, Captain, I'd like to speak to my client alone."

"Q"

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a *NEW* Charlie Dark story by

BRIAN GARFIELD

Charlie, the counterespionage agent, is over-age, overweight, and soft, but that didn't stop his boss from sending him on an assignment that should have been given to a younger, more athletic man. But Rice always gave Charlie the difficult, if not impossible, cases—and the most important. You see, "one of our gadgets is missing" in the Aleutians, and it wouldn't do at all if the Russians found it first. . .

CHARLIE IN THE TUNDRA

by BRIAN GARFIELD

"Attu," Rice said.

"Gesundheit," I replied.

He sneered. "The island of Attu. Westernmost island in the Aleutian chain off the coast of Alaska. Nearer to Siberia than to North America. Pack your woolies, Charlie."

I scowled. "Attu has been of utterly no importance to anybody since May 1943. Is this your version of sending me to Siberia? What are my transgressions?"

"They are too many to enumerate. In fact, it might be an interesting idea to see about stationing you there permanently. Do you have any idea how many American soldiers got frostbitten up there in the War?" He blew cigar smoke in my face. "The limo's waiting—Ross will brief you on the way to the airport. It seems one of our gadgets is missing."

"It would be tedious for us if the Russians got their hands on it," Ross said in the car on the way to my digs to pick up my clothes. "We'd have to change all our codes and computer cipher programs."

"Is the pilot all right?"

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"Concussion and a few fractures. He should be fine, eventually. Up there they learn how to crack up easy. The Air Force collected the plane and most of the debris and barged it over to the island of Shemya—it's only a few miles away and that's where the Air Force Base is."

"I know."

"You've been there before?"

"Twenty-odd years ago on the U-2 program."

Ross was intrigued; he's still a collegiate at heart—young enough to be eager-beaverish. "What's it like up there?"

"The end of the world."

Ross sat on the window sill and watched me pack my thermal socks and longjohns. "Anyway," he said, "it wasn't until they hauled the wreckage back to Shemya and sorted through it that they realized the computer code transceiver was missing. Conclusion is it's still on Attu but they're reluctant to send a team of men back to go over the crash site with microscopes—if the Russians spotted the activity they'd realize something important is missing. I suppose if we merely send one man to scout around it won't draw that much attention from their satellite cameras. But one thing I don't understand—why did they pick on you? It's not your sort of job. Why not use an Air Force man already stationed up there at Shemya? It's only a few miles away."

"It wasn't an Air Force caper," I said. "It was ours. The pilot was ours, the mission was ours, and the CCT box is ours. I'm sure the Air Force volunteered to keep looking for it but the Agency told them to lay off—'We'll take care of it ourselves.' The usual interservice nonsense. As for why me, it's probably because I've been there before. And because if there's a miserably uncomfortable job, Rice always likes to see that it gets tossed in my lap."

"Why don't you quit, Charlie? He makes your life hell and you're past retirement age anyway."

"What, and give Rice the satisfaction of knowing he drove me out?"

The long trip entailed a change of planes at Seattle, an overnight stop in Anchorage, and an all-day island-hopping flight over the thousand-mile length of the Aleutian chain aboard one of Bob Reeve's antiquated but sturdily dependable DC-6 bush transports. Flying regular schedules through that weather Reeve's Aleutian

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Airways has somehow managed to maintain an astonishing record of safety and efficiency—indeed, it is one of the few airlines in the world that conducts a profitable business without Government subsidy.

I was dizzy from crosswind landings and wild takeoffs at Cold Bay, Dutch Harbor, and the Adak Naval Base. We bypassed Amchitka because they had fog blowing across the runway at 90 knots. Eventually we mushed down onto Shemya, the penultimate Aleutian—a flat dreary stormy atoll hardly big enough to support the runways of its airfield. It was only October but the island was slushy with wet snow. A typical gray Aleutian wind drove the cold mist through me as I lumbered down the portable aircraft stairs and ducked into the waiting blue 4x4 truck.

The only above-ground structures were the enormous reinforced hangars that sheltered our DEW-Line combat planes and the huge kite-winged high-altitude spy planes that had supplanted the U-2 in our Siberian overflight program. The hangars were left over from the War—they'd been built to house B-29 Superfortresses for the invasion of Japan that never eventuated. Everything else on the island—a top-secret city housing several thousand beleaguered Air Force personnel—was underground out of the weather. The weather in the Bering Sea is the worst in the world.

I checked in with base command and was trundled to a windowless motel-like room in Visitors' Quarters, ate an inadequate supper in the officers' cafeteria, then went to visit the injured pilot.

He was a chunky Texan with thick short sandy red hair, freckles, and an abundance of bandages and plaster casts. His eyes were painfully bloodshot—evidence of concussion.

"Paul Oland," he said. "Afraid I can't shake hands, Mr. Dark. Pull up a pew there."

I sat, not quite fitting on the narrow chair. "How're you making it?"

"They tell me I'll be flying again in a few months, to my surprise. Sheer dumb luck. I should've been dead."

"Tell me about the accident."

"Well, I'd been at 120,000 feet over Kamchatka and I was on my way back with a lot of exposed film. They've recovered all the film, by the way. It's all in the debriefing report."

"I've read it. But I'd like to hear you describe it."

"You know much about the weather patterns up here?"

"I helped set up the U-2 program here."

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"Then you know what it's like. Half the time you're in thick fog and hundred-knot winds at the same time. You can't tell up from down. You have to rely on your instruments and if the instruments start to kick around you've had it."

"That's what happened? Instrument failure?"

"They didn't fail. They just weren't a match for the williwaw. I'd made my descent into the muck—I was down to four thousand feet and still dropping. The only way you can see anything around here is get right down on the deck. The pilots who get lost and get killed are the ones who try to climb out of it. There isn't any top on it. It just goes up forever, right clear to the moon. Anyway, I was circling in from the west to line up for my landing approach. They had me on radar and I had my Loran bearings—it should have been fine. But there's an incredible amount of electrical activity in these clouds. My needles were jumping around like they got stung by red ants.

"I figured that would pass, they'd calm down when I got closer to base and the signals got stronger. But then I got a squeal from the tower—I'd gone off their screen behind a mountain on Attu. I figured it had to be the north end of Attu, so I pulled hard left and started to climb—I still couldn't see a thing, it was a williwaw blowing out there, and my radar screen was useless because of dozens of false images reflected back from the moisture in the clouds. The next thing I knew I was bellyflopping across Fish Hook Ridge."

"Belly landing?"

"Landing? No. Accident. Ten feet lower and I'd have crashed nosefirst into the cliff. Blind luck, I slid across the top of it instead. I was about three miles south of where I'd thought I was—the wind blew me that far off course in something like forty-five seconds while I was off the Shemya radar screen. I mean it's fantastic up here, the elements. This weather goes up and down, up and down—"

"So you hit the top of the ridge—"

"And flipped over and busted most of my bones. The plane came apart but it wasn't too bad. Bits and pieces went in various directions. The canopy saved me—it didn't cave in. God knows why. Most of the dashboard fell apart, though."

"Including the code box."

"Yeah. Including the code box."

He looked morose.

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There isn't a single tree on Attu—or for that matter on any of the Aleutian Islands—but the tundra growth is a matte on everything and makes for difficult boggy walking, especially for someone as heavy as I am.

We'd had to wait 36 hours for a break in the weather. Then the helicopter shuttled me across to the big island and left me there with a sort of Boy Scout camping outfit in my backpack in case the weather didn't permit the chopper's picking me up at sundown—a strong likelihood.

The chopper pilot had done a bit too much plain-English talking into his microphone and I reprimanded him because he'd said enough to alert a sufficiently sharp-eared Soviet radio monitor to the fact that we were searching for something crucial, valuable, and portable on Attu. It added a sense of urgency to my job and made me glad of the portable radio in my pack. We weren't far off the Soviet coast, after all. And I was dismally aware of the fact that if the Soviets sent people in to "help" me hunt for the code box, my own people weren't likely to start World War III over it. Langley's attitude is to do your best but take your losses.

I was dropped off within a hundred yards of the crash site but it took me 20 minutes to get there on foot; I had to crab my way up the cliffs. I wondered how the devil the Japanese and American infantries had managed to fight a war here. In 1943 the entrenched Japanese defense force had been annihilated by 15,000 American troops who somehow made amphibious landings on the beaches. The fighting was wild and vicious. Half of the U.S. soldiers had been evacuated on stretchers or left buried on the island—combat wounds, frostbite, shock, trenchfoot, williwaw madness.

All those lives had been expended for it and ever since then it had been ignored by the world: nobody needed it; Attu was as useless as any piece of ground on earth. Uninhabited and unloved. Technically it belongs to the United States and officially it is a National Battlefield Park—like, say, Gettysburg; it has an obscenely large military cemetery. But tourists do not queue up to go there. Nothing exists on the mountainous tundra except mud, grass, brush, snow, and the rusting relics of old warfare: abandoned artillery, wrecked planes, discarded canteens, bent M-1 rifles, ruined Japanese caterpillar trucks, crushed infantry steel helmets.

The morning was fairly clear—unusual. I could see down the

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length of Massacre Valley to the foam of Massacre Bay. These place-names dated back to Soviet sealing days in the Nineteenth Century when Aleut Indians had been decimated by Russian sailors; in World War II they were eerily fitting. To the east I saw an Air Force jet lift above the Shemya runway and circle away toward Amchitka, the Atomic Energy Commission's private test-hole island, an hour's flight away over the horizon.

I was alone on Attu with the volcanos and the tundra—a rare distinction in which I took no pleasure. I removed my backpack, anchored it with boulders in case of a sudden williwaw, and began to prowl.

I was resigned to a long dismal search. If the code box had been in plain sight the Air Force people would have found it. So it had fallen into a crevice or tumbled into a pool of mud or rolled down a cliff.

First a snack—two roast beef sandwiches to keep my strength up. They tasted like styrofoam. Then I unlimbered the portable metal-detector and put my nose to the ground, cursing Rice in a dreary monotone.

The day was wasted. The chopper managed to collect me at sundown; I spent another 36 hours on Shemya shooting pool and assuaging boredom before the weather broke and allowed me to return to Attu. Resuming the search I spent five hours clambering cautiously over the east side of the ridge. The metal-detector unearthed dozens of cartridges, rifles, canteens, and other souvenirs—but no CCT box.

I worked a checkerboard pattern and decided to keep the current sweep inside a seventy-yard radius of the spot where the plane had come apart; my first search, a fifty-yard circle, had proved fruitless. When the seventy-five-yard circle produced nothing I ate lunch and expanded the search area to a hundred-yard radius.

In the afternoon the clouds built up and the wind began to cry across the ridgetops. I went back to my campsite and shouldered into the heavy parka and continued my work muffled in a thick earflapped hat and heavy gloves. I kept one eye on the weather, ready to seek shelter, but it held—the clouds remained a few hundred feet above my 2000-foot ridge, although I could see snow-squalls offshore that came right down to the water.

At about half-past three my search brought me around to the

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west rim of the ridge. By a fluke the sun broke through at that moment and a painful blade of reflected light stabbed at me from a rubble of volcanic rock 200 feet below me at the foot of the cliff.

It excited me because rusty relics don't gleam like that. It was the shine of fresh new metal or possibly of glass.

It was a long climb down because I had to go around. A mountain climber might have rappelled down in five minutes but I'm too old and too fat for athletics. I took my time, going down from rock to rock on the rubber soles of my insulated boots, hanging onto a rope I'd anchored to a boulder at the top.

By the time I made my way around to the point where I'd seen the glimmer, the sun had long since vanished again. But I found it anyway, knowing where to look, and it was indeed the Agency's CCT code box—a device similar to an ordinary pocket calculator, full of transistorized printed miniature circuits designed to send and receive messages in codes that were virtually impenetrable by anyone who didn't possess an identical CCT with identically programmed circuitry.

The box was battered and mangled from its fall; unserviceable—but that wouldn't matter to the Russians if they'd got their hands on it. Damaged or not, it would have yielded up its secrets to any examiner of its circuitry. I was relieved to have it in hand.

I contemplated the steep climb back to camp and I made a face. Out of habit and procrastination I turned to survey the horizons—and saw through a notch in the sodden hills a dark silent bulk sliding along the waves, heading out to sea. Even as I watched the submarine its decks began to run awash; it submerged quickly and I might have imagined it except for the motorized rubber dinghy that came birling through the surf onto the strip of volcanic sand that the invaders of 34 years ago had code-named Beach Red.

The submarine had come up on the blind side of the island, launched its dinghy, and fled immediately. It meant only one thing: they were Russians.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Dark. Ain't nothing flying around here except the hangars. We've got a class-A williwaw in progress. Wind gauge is gusting to a hundred and fifteen knots. Maybe by morning—"

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"Tell the Base C.O. there are strangers on Attu. Possibly Soviets. And a submarine lying off the western beach. You got that?"

"Yes, sir. Acknowledge."

Low sunbeams slanted onto the sea through a distant hole in the overcast. From the rim of the cliff and against the shimmering glare on the ocean I saw the tiny outline of a solitary figure climbing toward me.

I gathered my gear, stowed the CCT in my parka, and carried the backpack away down the east face of the ridge toward Massacre Valley. It was slow going in the sucking tundra but I wanted to be well away from the crash site. It was a big island; all I had to do was stay out of sight until I could be picked up.

I secreted the heavy metal-detector under an overhang; I had no further need of it. Then I buckled into the backpack and pressed on.

The light drained out of the sky; the wind came and with it fog. I knew I needed shelter.

The best I could find was a sort of hollow in the rocks. It broke most of the wind. I wrapped up in blankets and dug out an inadequate dinner of sandwiches and bottled vitamin-fruit concentrate. Then I rummaged in the pack for my sole weapon—an airman's lightweight survival carbine. I loaded it and laid it beside me.

The williwaw struck at nightfall and I spent most of the night emphatically miserable in a cringing huddle, clutching the blankets around me with my face buried in cloth and my ears deafened by the cry of the storm.

By the time it eased away, the luminous dial of my watch told me it was only midnight, but I was battered and exhausted and dismally cold.

I rooted dry socks out of the pack. My fingers were tingling numb; I had trouble getting the boots off and on. I ate another sandwich and waited for daybreak, thinking about that man I'd seen climbing the ridge. If he found me he wouldn't leave me alive.

My survival through several decades of intelligence capers and Cold War conflicts has been a matter of wits rather than atavistic toughness. I am a poor marksman and have never bothered to learn anything about unarmed combat or pressure-points or outdoor tricks. I have never been painted into a kill-or-be-killed

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corner; it's not my fashion. I had never killed anyone or tried to. It is my conceit that any fool can kill people. I fancy myself a bit better than that.

But if a Soviet scout found me. . .

"It's pea soup up here."

"It's often like that, sir, but if you can make your way down to the beach at the foot of the valley it may be clear down there. We'll try to get a helicopter in after you've reached position. We chased their submarine out past the twenty-mile limit. If they've still got anyone on the island he'll keep—just stay out of their way."

"You can bet on it." I packed the radio and began the slow descent. Fog and light rain swirled about me.

The wind sluiced down the slope behind me, carrying sound. That was how I got my first warning.

He was making noise with his canteens and metal impedimenta and heavy boots. No more noise than I'd been making—but the wind was in my favor. I heard him first.

I wheeled in alarm and saw him bearing down, vague in the mist—a big man made bulkier by his quilted Siberian parka and his festoonings of equipment—moving fast downhill through the fog perhaps 50 yards above me. The object in his fist looked like a machine pistol, wicked, efficient.

When he stopped and lifted it to aim I flung myself behind a boulder and heard the ricocheting bullets shriek over my head.

I crawled madly—infuriated to a white-hot rage; fear saps a man of his dignity and that's a hateful plight.

"Shemya. Charlie Dark calling Shemya. For Pete's sake come in Shemya."

Nothing. Static. I was in a dead-radio pocket.

I caromed off the walls of a Japanese trench, bouncing off the slippery sides, running as best I could—shambling, really; the mud sucked at my boots. I made random turns in the maze every time I came to a fork. The Japanese had dug miles of trenches.

Finally I stopped and attempted to control my breathing. I'd been making too much racket. Use your head, Charlie—keep your wits because that clown intends to kill you to get his hands on the code box in your pocket.

I moved on, bent low and trying to walk without sound. It was

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difficult; the boots squished in the muck.

The wind moaned; mist rolled and curled in unpredictable tendrils—one moment I was socked in, blind, and the next I could see blue sky. I kept stopping to listen. At first I heard him banging around up there, running from trench to trench, searching. Then the clamor stopped and I knew he was moving as I was—softly, waiting for me to give myself away.

He was the hunter. It put the burden on him. Realizing that, I knew my best chance was to stop.

The boulder had been too huge to shift, so they had curled the trench around it, undercutting its belly. I wouldn't find better cover. I crouched under the overhanging rock and took out the survival carbine, cocked it, and waited.

I thought of trying the radio again but that was no good. They couldn't help me in the fog—and he might hear my voice.

I heard the suck of bog around his boots.

He was up high on the mountain side somewhere above the trench. The rock above my head prevented me from seeing him—and prevented him from seeing me as well. Maybe I had a chance.

He was still searching for me and that meant it was more than mere curiosity. He knew I had the code box; otherwise he'd have been satisfied to run me off the search area. Possibly he'd found the abandoned metal-detector and drawn his conclusions from that; or maybe he'd seen my tracks at the foot of the cliff where I'd recovered the CCT. A man adept at reading tracks could have—

Tracks. The realization grenaded into me. I'd left huge tracks in the muddy trench. Not being an outdoorsman I hadn't even thought of it before.

My tracks led to this spot. They didn't lead away from it.

Too late now to think about sweeping mud over them. All I could do was pray he didn't see my spoor.

But he found it.

The trench walls were nine or ten feet high. If the Japanese had used ladders they had long since rotted away. The only way to get down was to jump; the only alternative was to travel along the trench to a distant point where the walls were lower.

I listened to him come. He was near the boulder, just above me. He went back and forth a couple of times. I could see what he

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saw—tracks on one side, no tracks on the other.

I heard the harsh metal clack when he worked the mechanism of the machine pistol.

Then unaccountably his boots moved away.

It took me a moment to understand. Then I realized. The trench was too wide for him to leap across it. And he couldn't jump down in plain view of me. He was heading along the trench to jump into it beyond the bend and come at me carefully on a level.

While I listened to his footsteps recede I knew I couldn't stay here. Some primitive impulse drove me out of my shelter—back the way I'd come, sliding my feet into the tracks I'd already made.

I approached the bend and stopped, my back to the wall, searching the rim above me. Then I heard him again—he was past the bend; something clanked.

I slid along the wall, coating the parka with muck. I was in time to see him jump right down into my view.

The muck betrayed him. His feet slid out from under him and he sprawled. The machine pistol slid out of his hand and lay there with its handle protruding from the mud at an angle.

I took a pace toward him and spoke in Russian, "Be still."

He froze. His face came around—a big flat Mongol face, the face of a Siberian Tatar Cossack.

I trained the carbine on him. "Take it easy, Tovarich." But my heart pounded. His face was preternatural, terrifying. His dark eyes burned at me. Then they flicked toward the machine pistol just beyond the reach of his long powerful arms.

Sure, I thought. They'd picked a Mongol for the job because they wanted someone expendable and someone expert at outdoor maneuver—a man who could read the earth like an Apache Indian and find an object that American eyes had missed. An animalistic soldier who could move across an enemy island without being trapped by the enemy.

In short, he was formidable. Primitive but clever; simple but expert—a fighter, a survivor, a killer.

All this I understood with one look at him. And something else: he wasn't programmed to surrender.

He came to his feet with slow menacing care. He kept looking from me to his machine pistol and back. Judging his chances. His eyes lingered a moment on my survival carbine. It was a high-

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velocity .22, very small and light. He was thinking he could absorb one or two of those and still live to kill me.

He wasn't a technological sophisticate. There was something I knew that he didn't know. I had an edge that had nothing to do with the gun in my hands. But just the same I faced a terrible dilemma.

I said in English, "I won't kill you in cold blood. It's not my style."

I could see by the slight squint of his eyes that he didn't understand my English. I went on, talking in a calm voice as you might talk to a skittish animal to calm it. "I can't just walk away. You'd come after me. I can't tie you up—if I get that close to you, you'll find some way to get the better of me. I can try to take you down to the beach at gunpoint but that doesn't have much appeal either. In this fog? You'd have too many chances to escape or jump me. Look, I want to get out of this alive."

He only stood there, facing me, adamant.

I said in Russian, "Don't try to reach your gun."

He made no reply but from the flash of his eyes I knew he'd understood that. Stubborn, willful, he watched me with singleminded intensity.

I said reasonably, "You might kill me and get the box. But you can't get off the island. We've driven your submarine away. You're stranded here. Your only choice is to go back with me. I won't hurt you if you don't force me to."

With one hand I held the gun on him, with the other I wormed the radio out of its bag. I spoke into the mouthpiece in English.

"Shemya, this is Charlie Dark. I doubt you can hear me. But if you can, send a squad over here to help me out. I've got my hands full with a Mongolian Tatar who wants my guts for lunch." I waited for a reply, got none, switched it off, and fumbled to put it away.

He was motionless; his very stillness was menacing. His quick determined mind was racing visibly and I knew I'd never get him to the beach.

I spoke to him in English. "It's splitting hairs and I'm going to hate myself for a hypocrite, but I don't see any other way to do this. You're too healthy for me to contend with."

He didn't even blink.

I switched to Russian: "We're going to walk down the valley to the beach. You first."

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Then I turned my head as if to locate something in my pack.

It was the break he'd waited for. He pounced on the machine pistol, willing to take his chances, figuring he could survive my first shot or two, figuring my reaction time would be slow—an old fat soft American.

The weapon rode up in his grasp and in that broken instant of time I wondered if I'd guessed wrong. But it didn't matter now. I didn't bother to try to lift my carbine; it would have been a useless gesture. I saw the grim stubborn satisfaction in his eyes; a trace of puzzlement flicked across him but he was already committed. He pulled the trigger.

The explosion rang in my ears. Pieces of heavy steel whacked into the walls of the trench. The Mongol wheeled back with a wail, blood streaming from his right hand in a gout. He sank to his knees and folded himself protectively over the shattered hand, grunting his agony.

I found the first-aid kit in my pack and tossed it to him. "Here. Bind it. We've got a long hike ahead of us."

And hike we did. He was docile enough now; the injury had blown the fight out of him.

The chopper collected us at noon on Massacre Beach.

The base commander drove me to the plane. When I got out of the car we shook hands. He said, "Thanks for bringing him in alive. We'll milk him for every drop. But I still don't understand how you brought it off."

"I guess I didn't play fair with him. I could have told him not to try to shoot that machine pistol. You can't fire a weapon that's got mud jammed up its muzzle. It won't shoot—it'll only explode."

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

ROBERT TWOHY

A strange story . . . Our staff of readers used other words to describe it—bizarre, weird, creepy, chilling . . . "Things aren't always as they seem," and is it possible there are "technicians of fate"? If so, it can happen to you—no, it is *happening to you . . .*

A CHANGE IN THE PROGRAM

by *ROBERT TWOHY*

It was a few minutes past ten o'clock on a warm moonlit night in June. Jack Dannen drove through the mountains north of Santa Barbara, on his way home from a conference in San Francisco. The radio was on; a pathetic boy, expiring nasally of slash wounds, bade farewell to his best friend, his mother, and a girl named Maraquita. Feeling alive and alert, Dannen sang along with him. Soon he'd be caressing his own girl, Joanne. Twenty-four hours earlier than anticipated: the last session tonight had been canceled. ". . . you were muh shining joo-il, and so I hadda fight dat bitter doo-il . . ."

Dannen felt for the pathetic nasal boy, regretted that his dastardly antagonist, far beneath him in sensitivity, had been handier with a switchblade. It was a shame. Like Maraquita, Joanne was a shining jewel; but Dannen hoped he wouldn't have to reach for a knife to prove it, because he was no great shakes at violence.

The car hummed along. A good 1966 Galaxie, older but sounder than 80% of the cars on the road. When he had joined the firm, they had insisted that you drive a car not more than three years old. Company attitudes change; now you could drive what you wanted, so long as it was clean and mechanically sound. He earned five times what he had started at, and would not think of switching to a newer model, not while the old war-wagon ran as well as it did. Joanne drove their new car, a '74 Pontiac, green

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and shimmering like an ocean wave. That was a nice car too—but he preferred the Galaxie. Good mileage, simple upkeep, fine performance—treat it right and it treated you right.

He drove at 50 on the undulating lonely road, thinking of the poor dying boy and Maraquita, thinking of his wife Joanne, proud of the Ford Motor Company, of America, of California, of his town, Ojai, of his company, Pacific Consumer Products of San Francisco, and pleased with being himself, Jack Dannen, alive and alert in this the thirty-second year of his life, in good clothes, solvent, and on his way home.

A black shape showed at the side of the straight stretch ahead of him. Hitchhiker. A flash came to him: himself, a crumpled heap with blood pouring from his head, lying in a ditch. No way.

The headlights picked the man out clearly: dark suit streaked with mud; hat pulled low; right hand up. A dead-white face, stretched in a grimace . . . *NO WAY!* The man took a crossover step and threw himself face down across the road.

A glance in the rearview mirror—headlights, a car coming up in the next lane. No chance to swing left. The tires shrieked, the skid started. He unbraked, turning into the skid, and got control. The shape of the prone man raced up in the headlights. Brake again to the floor, fists tight on the wheel; he slammed to a stop at the edge of the road.

The car on the left had sped past. Taillights disappeared over a crest. Only highway showed in Dannen's headlights. The man had to be under the front of the car. There had been no bump. So he must be lying there under the overhanging grille.

Dannen realized that he was shaking. He thought, all right, come on now, it's all right. You haven't done anything. Merely responded to a driving hazard. The guy wanted to kill himself and failed. He's there under the grille. You'd know if you'd hit him.

The guy may have nothing to live for, but you have. Back up, turn the wheel out, go. If that gargoyle thought he was going to promote a ride out of this maneuver, he was wrong.

The motor had stalled. Dannen turned the ignition key, pushed the gear to reverse. Then he saw the man, at the passenger door. Dannen's eyes went from the mud-streaked coat to the gun in the right hand.

He looked at the black hole of the gleaming gun. The button on the passenger door was down. The gun jerked at it, then stared again at Dannen. He reached over and pulled the button up.

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The man pulled open the door. He stood there a few moments. His eyes were fixed on Dannen's. They were dead, filmy eyes in a wide face that showed waxy white under streaks of mud.

He put his left leg in the car, slow and heavy, as if it were a weight, stood a few seconds like that, then heaved himself in. A stink rolled out of him—of wet earth, of decay. He slumped there, gazing at Dannen. In the dark hair over the left ear was what looked like a crusted black hole. Dannen felt horror.

Slowly the man moved the gun to his left hand, and, groping, caught the door handle and pulled the door shut.

He said, in an odd, thin voice, "Drive."

For ten minutes Dannen drove, and the man said nothing at all. He sat there like a hunk of earth, head hanging forward, lips hanging open, right hand limp on the gun in his lap.

". . . why do you play your games on my heart?" wailed a girl on the radio.

Slowly Dannen's hand went toward the dial. The man did not move. Dannen turned the radio off. He held his breath, and listened for the man's breath. He heard nothing but the purr of the motor, the slither of the tires on the road.

He's passed out, Dannen thought. All I have to do is reach across, take the gun—

The odd, thin voice said, "D'you have any whiskey?"

Dannen's hands tightened on the wheel. The dead filmy eyes stared at him. The lips hung open. They hadn't moved when the voice spoke. Dannen said, "Glove compartment."

Glancing, he saw the left hand move slowly, clumsily, toward the glove compartment. It fumbled at the push-catch, and it must have been almost a minute before the door fell open. More fumbling; then the hand came out with the pint bottle. The voice said, through the unmoving lips, "Open it."

But how could you say clearly the word 'open' without moving your lips?

Dannen took the bottle, and controlling the wheel with his forearm, twisted the cap loose.

The man took the bottle, held it to his chest. He did not drink from it. His head hung forward and he sat like that, the bottle under his face. Several minutes passed. Dannen thought, he hasn't the strength to lift the bottle to his lips. And he cried silently, in fury, Coward! He's almost gone, and you sit here frozen with fear—reach over, take his gun!

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The man held the bottle out. "Put the cap on." Dannen did so. The man put the bottle back in the glove compartment, shoved the door shut. Dannen saw that his movement was less clumsy, as if the fumes from the bottle had given him strength—and cursed himself for his timidity.

A thin laugh from the lips that did not move. "You're wondering, aren't you? About the wound." The left hand touched the black hole in his dark hair. "It's dried blood. And dirt."

"From falling in the road?"

"Bullet wound." Fingers in his lap tapped the butt of the gun. The thin laugh again.

Dannen thought, suicide try. The gun, then throwing himself in the road. A man who wanted to die, but somehow couldn't pull it off. Close to death, however—how could you have a bullet wound in your head and not be close to death?

Now he seemed revived—from breathing the fumes of whiskey. Dannen felt he could talk now, reason: "You're badly hurt. There's a turnoff a few miles up, I saw a sign. We'll find a doctor."

A strange giggle came from the lips. "A doctor has already pronounced me dead."

Dannen said carefully, "Is the bullet still in your head?"

"It never came out."

"It has to be got out. They'll put you to sleep, and when you wake up you'll be better, clearer—"

"Not this corpse. What time is it?"

"10:28."

"How far are we from Ventura?"

"Seventy, seventy-five miles."

"We have to be there by 12:30."

"You'll never last. Let me make this turn."

"No."

They swept by.

Dannen said, "It's your life. But you'll never last to Ventura."

The giggle again. "Things aren't always as they seem."

Dannen drove a while. The voice came suddenly, "Are you afraid of the gun?"

"Afraid of it? Sure I am."

"Take it."

Dannen stared. The hand had lifted from the gun. "Go ahead."

Dannen reached, took the gun, slid it into his left coat pocket. "Now I'm going to take you to the next police station."

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"Why?"

"Because you're badly injured."

"I'm not injured at all. Tired, yes . . . but sound as I ever was."

"With a bullet in your head?"

"Not my head. It's James Whitlock's head."

"You're not making sense." A turn was coming up. Dannen began to slow.

The man said, "Don't. You can't turn off here."

"Can't I?"

"No. We have to get to Ventura by 12:30."

"Why?"

"Because that's the hour Robert McCarthy will be strolling on the beach."

"Who's Robert McCarthy?"

"A little old man who strolls every night on the beach . . . You can't turn off here. You can tell I'm much stronger than when I got in."

"You sound a little better, but you don't look better."

"Nor ever will. This body never will. But forget the body. It isn't me. It never was. We're only traveling together, me and Whitlock's body."

Dannen slowed to make the turn. He felt the man's heavy hand on his arm. "Go past," whispered the voice, "you've got to go past."

"Give me a reason. A good reason."

"I have to get to Ventura."

"That's not a good reason."

"All right. Go past—and I'll tell you, I'll tell you everything. Then you'll understand."

Dannen could afford to go past. There were more turnoffs. He had the gun, the man was no longer a threat. And his voice did seem strong, controlled, thin though it was. And Dannen admitted it—the man's will to go on was stronger than his own to turn off. And he was curious about a man who could ignore a bullet in his head—if that were really a fact.

The man said, through his motionless lips, "Where are you from?"

"Ojai."

"That has to be near Ventura."

"It is. Twelve miles inland." Dannen raised his eyebrows. "You're from Ventura and didn't know that?"

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"I'm not from Ventura. James Whitlock is from Ventura."

"Oh, yes. Whitlock is the body that you're traveling with. But you must be somebody."

"I'm not. I was, but not for years. I was a child, in San Francisco . . . do you know Pacific Heights?"

"I know it's an area in San Francisco."

"An area of wealth. We lived in a big house. I visited there yesterday."

"You say your name is James Whitlock?"

"We have no names. The child I once was had a name, George Taney. But that was long ago. He died at the age of ten, whooping cough. That was in 1931. They're all dead now, all the Taneys, but the house still stands. Different people, different furnishings, but the memories are strong. I went through the rooms yesterday, and it all came back. That was my mistake, to pay a visit, but we're not machines. We aren't expected to be. We're granted our lapses, our remembrances. Actually a fair amount of freedom is given us. They want just one thing—that we do our jobs, and if we make a mistake, that we fix it up.

"That's why I'm here. I should have gotten Whitlock on the plane at five o'clock last evening, but I wanted to visit the old house. And he seemed safe enough, in the de Young Museum . . . what could happen in the de Young Museum? I thought, leave him by himself for an hour, what's the difference? We'll make the plane all right . . . but when I got back to him he was dead . . . You never knew him, did you?"

"I? Knew him? Whitlock, you mean? No. Should I?" The man was delirious, that was clear . . . How could he speak so clearly without moving his lips? Whatever the man said, Dannen would take the next turn.

The waxy face turned full to Dannen, and the dead eyes . . . "You've never seen this face?"

"Listen, you said you were going to explain who you are, and why you have to be in Ventura, and how you got hurt."

"Not me—Whitlock. And not hurt—dead."

"All right, Whitlock. All right, dead. But explain to me." Dannen nodded toward a road sign. "You have twelve miles to convince me not to make the next turn."

"You won't," said the voice. "You can't. You'll find that out . . . I'm fine now, you see. I'll tell you—but it's hard, because you're not ready. Although readier than you were. Readier to be-

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lieve that Whitlock, this carcass here, is truly dead . . . Do you believe in fate?"

"Fate? What do you mean?"

"A man goes about his daily routine, an ordinary man. He leaves his office a little later than usual. Perhaps a late caller delayed him. He misses his commuter train. There's a tavern near—he stops for a few drinks, waiting for the next train. There's a man there, who himself has just casually stopped in . . . the man is a criminal. He sees the first man change a $50 bill, and thinks, why not him as well as the next? He follows him out, assaults him in a dark place, demands money. The first man resists. There is a gunshot, the first man dies . . . if he hadn't been working late, if he hadn't stopped at the tavern, hadn't flashed the $50 bill, it never would have happened to him, like that . . . Do you believe in that?"

"Believe in it? Of course. I mean, that's the way some people do die. Haphazardly, like that."

"Haphazardly?" Again that strange giggle, from that dead mouth. "Ah, my friend, little you know. Little you know the planning, the programming, the intricate details that had to be worked out, by so many of us, just to be sure that the late caller did call, and that the first man did miss his train; that he should decide to stop at this particular bar for his couple of drinks; that he should have in his pocket the $50 bill, and only that bill, so as to tempt the criminal.

"Do you know how long you work on a project like that? Days? No—months. Ever such slight shiftings of the normal patterns are worked on, over a period of time. Ever so many discussions, involving all of us, all the technicians who are related to the project. All efforts must be coordinated, all information on the principals, and countless others who may be only on the fringes of the program . . . Do you think that a man really wants to kill another man for $50? Do you think a man wants to die for $50? Can you imagine the subtle pressures that must be exerted to make that $50 the focus of those two lives?"

Dannen drove, thinking, The man is raving. He said, "I'm going to take the next turnoff and take you to the police. You should be in a hospital."

"No. In a grave. There's a grave in Ventura for Whitlock."

"We're not going to Ventura."

"Yes. You will drive us there. It has to be. Not only *you* are in-

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volved, and Whitlock—countless others. It's all been programmed."

"In what way? Who by?"

"By those in a position higher than mine—I'm merely a technician. By the strategists. *They* decide. *They* lay out the programs. So-and-so, to come into the orbit of so-and-so, with such-and-such result, at such-and-such a time . . . We have our training period, but then we're on our own. We go by the book, if possible—if not, we improvise. We accomplish one way or another. A partial failure is endurable—it can be rectified. A total failure—well, the results of that are incalculable.

"Each program is conceived within a larger design. Years of intricate calculations and strategizing become so much waste. Everything has to be torn up, calculated again . . . I understand. I understand the consequence of failure. I understand what the strategists go through . . . The strain on us technicians is tremendous, but on them . . . ! Well, my mistake will be rectified—if I can get Whitlock to Ventura in time."

Dannen said carefully, "When did Whitlock die?"

"Yesterday afternoon, at 4:37."

"Yet he stood at the side of the road, two hundred and fifty miles south of San Francisco, flagged my car, threw himself in front of it, pulled a gun on me—how could he do all that if he was already dead?"

"Of course not. I did it."

"You?"

"Yes. I didn't even know if it could be done. I got back from my nostalgia trip to the big house on Pacific Heights and went to the gallery I had left him wandering in—he was an artist you see, a visitor of galleries, who had come to San Francisco to discuss an illustration job with a publisher, but also to visit the galleries. He wasn't there.

"I flitted through the galleries of the de Young. I knew he was around, because I could smell his trace in the air . . . I went outside and followed the trace. In a glade, secluded, behind some bushes, he lay. He had been discovered, a small group of people was around. I knew at once he was dead. Even before a doctor in the knot of people came forward, bent over him, and made the pronouncement."

Dannen came to a realization that he was gliding past the turnoff. Another realization came to him: that the time for decision-making on his part was over; that the voice, Whitlock's or who-

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ever's, was right; that he would drive him to the rendezvous in Ventura.

"It was, of course, my fault. If I had been with him I could have prevented the murder. Alone, he was able to dawdle, to let his senses respond to the pleasures of the museum, to entertain the notion of a stroll outside. I would have sensed danger and diverted him from walking in the deserted glade—not deserted of course, because Capstock, a dope addict, happened to be there at the time—"

"Capstock? The man who shot him?" And Dannen realized that for the first time he had unconsciously spoken of Whitlock in the third person.

"Yes. Capstock behaved instinctively, like the animal he is. Prey had come to him. No one was in sight or hearing. He pulled his gun. After Whitlock gave him his money, Capstock killed him. He's a man like that . . . At the moment, when the doctor straightened up, I didn't know who had killed Whitlock. It didn't matter then. The one thing I had to do was get his body out of there. Before they took it, certified his death . . . I had to get him on his feet.

"I didn't even know if it could be done. I had never done it. But I entered into him. In our training there had been some instruction in it—but long ago; and not detailed. There were only certain things you could do when you were inside a dead person, and they might work, might not—but some of it came back to me, and I did it, and realized that he was moving, getting to his feet . . . it took tremendous concentration, and expending of energy I'd never called on before.

"I paid no attention to the people around. I suppose they screamed, ran, to see the dead rise like that. I made Whitlock's body run. Somehow I drove him from there, running . . . Nearly exhausted, I ran him into an area behind the Natural History Museum where there are numerous old discarded exhibits. A pile of clay forms of animals, broken . . . there was a little niche under it. I got him into the niche. He was hidden there.

"I don't know if they searched for him or not. Perhaps they were too frightened by him. But I had other things to concern myself with. Whitlock was supposed to die, not in San Francisco yesterday afternoon, but in Ventura at 12:30 tonight. My negligence had caused the error. But there was still time to prevent it becoming a disaster.

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"I flitted to my section and reported what had happened. No time was lost in recrimination. Immediate coordination with other sections of the program was instituted. In a short time word came that Capstock was the murderer. He had been under no special observation or influence, he was part of no specific program at the time. But a tremendously important program was slated for his future, and a general survey of him had been maintained.

"So his address was got for me. No personnel was available to help me. I was told I was on my own, to do my best, to improvise. As I said, we are trained to do that. I was told Whitlock must be gotten to Ventura one way or another, to be there for his destiny. My leader told me, 'Don't fail.'

"That night I went to Capstock's place, a room near the park. With Whitlock's money he had made a buy, and was high. He hadn't a thought, of course, for the man he had slain. But I got into his head and made him think of him. Not remorsefully, of course, there is no remorse in Capstock, but with worry. He of course did not know that his victim had got up and run away. I got him to worry about possessing the gun.

"So eventually he took it from a drawer, put it in his pocket, went out and crossed the street into the park, to dispose of it. I tried to get him to go all the way to the Natural History Museum, but was not able to do that—he was too anxious to get rid of the gun and get back to his room. I had him bury the gun at the base of a tree just a little way into the park.

"I let him go then, because it was not Capstock I was interested in, but his gun."

"Why were you so anxious to get the gun?"

"It was something I had to have . . . Now I flitted back to Whitlock, got inside him, and raised him. With even more exhausting effort this time—he had stiffened, it was agony to get his joints and muscles into use again. But eventually, as I say . . . and I walked him through the dark park to the place where Capstock's gun was buried and fortunately it was buried loosely—even so, it seemed an eternity before I could get Whitlock's dead fingers to scratch it free and put it in his pocket."

He fell silent. Dannen drove a few minutes, thinking, could it be true? Could there be spirits around us and within us, technicians of fate, who guided us, pushed us toward our destinies—in accordance with plans given by other, higher spirits? Could one be truly sitting with him now, in his car, inside the body of a dead

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man? . . . "What," he asked, "is the tremendously important program of Capstock?"

"It's in the future. But work on it will start soon. He will fall under the influence of some people . . . an assassination."

"Who?"

"I have no idea, I'm no part of his program—he just blundered into mine. I have enough to concern myself with—with my own problem."

"And what if you should fail? I mean, Whitlock is already dead. What difference now whether you make it to Ventura or not?"

"Because a man's death is not only his own. It makes ripples. Many lives will be touched by the death of Whitlock, many processes will be set in motion. Itself, it is a plan within larger plans. It is a factor of influence on other matters, other destinies. At 12:30 tonight, on the beach at Ventura . . . that is the essential, which it is not for me to question. He's dead, but the effects of his death are still to come."

"Tell me how you got his body to where I picked him up."

"We were in the park, it was dawn. We had no money, Capstock had it. There would have been no way to influence Capstock to bury money in the park . . . We could not take plane, bus, train, we could not steal a car, I was not skilled enough to make his dead hands drive it . . . I got him on one of the main streets crossing San Francisco and we tried hitchhiking—but of course he looked ghastly, so people rushed by.

"Now it was becoming light, and a police car might pass anytime, or somebody would call the police with the word that a corpse-like figure with a blood hole in his head stood on that street . . . so I made him run again, stumble down side streets, cursing the weight and awkwardness of him . . . to a truck depot. And I left him in a toilet cubicle, and flitted into the office where I discovered that a truck was leaving in some hours, for San Luis Obispo. When it left, Whitlock's body lay among the cases in the rear.

"We got to San Luis in mid-afternoon. When the truck was unloaded, he was seen. But the men unloading were afraid. They moved back, gave us room. I had Whitlock's gun in his hand. I got him on the run, outside. A car happened to be idling at a stop-sign. I had him pull open the door. An elderly woman was the driver. She didn't panic or freeze, but did as I directed, made a few turns, and lost any pursuit. Then I had her drive out of town,

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into the mountains, a long way, a hundred miles—to the place where you saw him. I let her go then.

"I climbed Whitlock up a hillside and found some soft earth. I had him dig. I had him bury himself there, pull earth on top of himself so that he was hidden when the police, following the report of the old woman, came out there to look for him. During the time he was buried I had consultations with my program leader, and new coordinations were made. I returned to Whitlock. The police, having searched the area, were gone. I had Whitlock dig himself out and got him back on the road, where he was when you came."

"Why?" said Dannen. "Why go through all that? Why not have the woman drive all the way to Ventura?"

"Because there were other considerations." They had swept down the hill and past the lights of Santa Barbara. The ocean was now in view, to their right. Thirty minutes, thought Dannen. He looked at his watch: "11:55. We'll make it. Barely—but we'll make it . . . McCarthy, you say? Robert McCarthy, the man he has a rendezvous with?"

"In a way." The voice had an odd lilt. "I'm tired again . . . I'll have another jolt of your whiskey."

His awkward hand got the glove compartment open, twisted the cap off the bottle, and the other hand held the open bottle under the hanging face. Dannen drove in silence, thinking of all he had heard. "Why," he asked at length, "is McCarthy going to kill this man, this Whitlock . . . this creature already dead?"

"McCarthy has his part to play." The bottle went back into the compartment, the door was closed. "Take this next turn off the freeway."

Dannen did. They were in a settlement near the beach. "Turn here, left. Now . . . right. What's the time?"

"12:25."

"Good. And do you see that shape on the beach?"

The moon shone. Dannen had stopped the car at a fence blocking the end of the street, beyond which were dunes and then the slope of the beach. Several other cars were parked at the fence. A few houses lay farther down toward the beach. On the beach, near the surf, a small figure strolled.

"That is McCarthy. So all is coordinated." A low exultant giggle. The passenger door was opened. "Come help me. Whitlock's joints are stiff."

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Dannen walked around the car and helped the creature out. Whitlock stood swaying, with a hand on Dannen's arm. "Walk him toward this nearest house." It was some 20 yards off, a low weathered structure with a rail fence around. "Whitlock's place," said the voice. "In the beginning I thought it would be impossible to get here . . . oh, the intricacies! Oh, the influences! And my carelessness almost destroyed all those months of work!"

The clutch was harder on Dannen's arm, and suddenly the foul smell of that thing, that corpse, if that's what it really was, the smell of decaying flesh, and dank earth adhering to it, made Dannen sick and dizzy. He tried to pull away. But the clutch tightened more, and a low laugh sounded. "Not yet, not yet. Come with me to the gate." Dannen was being pulled along. "But wait. You missed something as we went by the parked cars. Look back. Look at the cars."

Dannen turned—and felt a shock like a blow in the stomach. A shape unmistakable to his eyes—a '74 Pontiac, dark in the night but showing here and there the greenish shimmer of an ocean wave, was the car nearest the house.

"Yes, Dannen." The low laugh again. "Your wife. She's in the house. She's been waiting since last night—waiting for Whitlock. He was expected back last night—and you were, and are, expected to be in San Francisco until tomorrow night. But your last meeting was canceled. Do you think that was haphazard? Oh, the planning, the planning! . . . She's been in this house often, while you've been away on your trips. They met at a party one night. You never knew him, though, you said."

The hand was a vise on Dannen's arm, he could not pull away; he stared at the house, which showed a light in the window of the front door, and listened in horror as the voice went on: "The strategists planned that you would arrive in the early evening. I'm speaking of the plans that were made, before my blunder forced improvisations. It was part of the early plan, that your meeting tonight would be canceled.

"So you would arrive at your home tonight, some three hours ago, and find your wife not at home, find her night things and cosmetics and overnight bag gone. You were to drink, to brood—then to call up some friends, inquiring. A particular person was to tell you—a troublemaker, eager for excitement—he was to give you Whitlock's name and address as a possibility . . . You were to come here, in drunken fury. You were to burst in the door and

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find them in bed. You were planned to bolt into the kitchen, grab a knife, lunge at Whitlock . . ."

They had gone through the gate and were now in front of the steps of the house. "Yes, Dannen, that was the way it was planned to happen; but my error forced these changes. Little things happened—notification to you, of delay of tonight's session, was itself delayed—so that you left San Francisco three hours later than originally planned. But it will all happen anyway, the same result—Whitlock and Joanne dead, and you—"

"Joanne! Not Joanne!" The shining jewel . . .

"Oh, come—you're a small person, Joanne is a small person—too many large things of which this sordid little event is only an influencing factor are involved. Come, hurry, McCarthy is near! You hear, I am shouting now, he can't hear the words but he can hear loud angry shouts . . . he will cautiously come closer."

Suddenly Whitlock's arm came behind Dannen, plucked the gun from his left pocket, and forced it into his right hand. Dannen saw a motion behind the glass, and the door started to open.

He cried, "No!" and tried to fling the gun from his hand. But now both dead hands of Whitlock were gripped tight around his right hand. The dead man, or whoever controlled his muscles, was far stronger than Dannen. "No! Not Joanne! Why Joanne?"

"It's the program, that's why." The door opened. Joanne, in her robe, stood there. Her startled face was white.

Dannen's hand was jerked up, his finger was pushed—the gun roared. She gave a soft, "Ohh!" and her hands went to her breast, from which spurted a gout of blood. She tumbled down the steps.

The gun roared again.

"And now," said the voice, "all is as it should be."

The pressure on Dannen's hand and arm fell away. The body of James Whitlock, many hours dead, fell like a sack at his feet.

He stood there, between the bodies of his wife and her lover, the gun hanging from his hand. A voice said, "My God!" He looked. A small man stood goggling at the rail fence.

Dannen cried, "Wait! It's not what you think! Wait! What you see is not . . . listen, listen!" Something to give them pause later, something to plant the tiniest doubt that possibly could grow . . .

"My God!" the man said again. "You've killed them! Both of them! Two shots, and both are dead!"

"No, not I. I was a tool! Listen, your name is McCarthy, isn't it? Listen, it's terribly important. We're controlled, do you see, we're

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all controlled. Nothing is haphazard, it's all part of some gigantic plan . . . McCarthy, you see? He told me your name is McCarthy! So how could I know, I've never seen you, I can't even see you clearly now . . ."

"My name's not McCarthy, what are you talking about? You're crazy, a crazy man! My God! Help, police, murder!" He raced away from the fence, toward the street.

Dannen stood there. He heard a soft chuckle. "I wouldn't be that careless. Not McCarthy, another name . . . and those other things I told you—about the truck workers in San Luis, the little old lady, Capstock, George Taney, the de Young, the Natural History Museum, the grave near where you picked me up . . . don't bother to have the police check on them. Or for fingerprints of Whitlock on the gun, the bottle in the car—long-dead fingers don't leave marks."

"You told me lies?"

"No, truth—but the truth disguised. Accept it, Dannen. You will spend the rest of your life in a place for the criminally insane."

"Why me? For God's sake, why me?"

"It's your fate."

"But I'm not insane!"

"Maybe you are. Maybe it's all a story you told yourself. Maybe Whitlock's body never got into your car. Maybe it's all imagined. Including me, my voice talking to you. Maybe I don't exist at all . . . Goodbye, Dannen."

Dannen stood there, and in a little while the police car came. They asked him questions. He didn't answer. They took him away. He sat in a cell. There was a hearing. A doctor said there seemed to be some inconsistency as to the condition of the body of Whitlock, and the purported time of the murder. Other doctors said they found no inconsistency.

A man named Porter, a nightly stroller on the beach, said that he had witnessed the murders, had seen the victims fall—and no one doubted that he spoke the truth. Policemen spoke. Dannen didn't speak. They took him away to a place for the criminally insane. He went like a machine about his routine there, and he never spoke to anybody, never spoke another word.

But now and then he hummed—a little song. Some of the attendants recognized it. It had to do with a youth dying after a duel fought over a girl named Maraquita, who was his shining jewel.

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a *NEW* short story by

ALVIN S. FICK

It's time you knew something about Alvin S. Fick, an interesting man with an interesting background, and a real pro at this game.

He had his first story accepted when he was twelve years old—for the children's page of the now defunct "Rural New Yorker." At 17 he was in the newspaper business and worked for three dailies. After that?—aircraft-carrier duty in the South Pacific during World War Two; stint in the bindery of the Government Printing Office in Washington; car salesman; farmer; typographic and graphics designer; clerk in a shoe store; and we can honestly say et cetera.

He has sold fiction and nonfiction to more magazines than we have space to list. And now?—let us quote Mr. Fick: "I fly my own Cessna 150 light plane; operate a private press (an old foot-treadle Pearl platen); plant a garden which my wife maintains; watch the woodchucks undermine the outhouse, tunnel under the barn foundation, perforate the pasture, browse the lawn; admire the hawks quartering the woods behind the house; jaw with the fellow who rents and works the tillable portion of the 79 acres of the old farm where we live. . ."

Wouldn't you like to know this guy?

And now his newest story—about a new character, "the world's greatest retired pickpocket"—but the most unorthodox pickpocket you are ever likely to read about. We'll be hearing more of Asher B. Cutshaw—you can bet on it. . .

"Q"

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THE GOLDEN DIPPER

by ALVIN S. FICK

"Build another one for me, Ted." Asher Cutshaw—Asher B. for Blakely Cutshaw—had waited patiently until the bartender came to his end of the bar. It was one of the reasons Ted Costello was glad that Cutshaw was one of the regulars at Dibb's.

He was a quiet drinker who always sat at the end where the bar was hinged and the top could be lifted for exit or entry. The gray at his temples, the clipped salt-and-pepper mustache beneath a blade of a nose, and the expensive clothes over a five-feet-nine frame gave him a distinguished appearance. He looked like a retired Air Force colonel who might have been something of a martinet.

Asher Cutshaw had seen much of the world, and when action at the bar was a little slow Ted Costello enjoyed spending free time chatting with him. Cutshaw's conversation usually was on esoteric matters—bits of arcane information which he laid on Costello's eardrums as casually as he laid a fifty-dollar bill on the bar. He did not dwell on the current craze, or the weather or sports, that troika of swaybacked drayhorses which bores bartenders and barbers from Boston to Bad Nauheim.

Once when Ted spoke about Mr. Cutshaw to his boss William Dibb, owner of the restaurant and bar, he got around quickly to one of Cutshaw's admirable traits.

"Mr. Cutshaw is one of our best customers, Mr. Dibb." Ted was busy polishing glasses and hanging them in the overhead wooden rack.

Dibb shifted his 242 pounds in the bar chair which, nearly hidden from view, squeaked piteously in protest over the unequal contest.

"He's got money, that's what you're saying." Will Dibb sipped his ginger ale. Silently he blessed his young bartender. Best one he had. Good with the customers. People liked him. But damn those red sideburns. How come red sideburns and blond hair? Honest fellow, too. Pay 'em well and they stay honest.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Dibb. He has it and he spends it." Costello paused. "Heaviest tipper this place has seen in the three years I've been here."

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Dibb reached across the bar to pat Costello's shoulder. He had to stretch to do it. When Will Dibb sat with his belt buckle rubbing the mahogany he was still quite some distance from the bar. "I hope you're here thirty-three years more," he said.

A couple of customers walked in before Ted Costello had a chance to answer, to regale his boss with some of Mr. Cutshaw's idiosyncrasies. Of course, there was one he could not discuss with the owner of Dibb's Restaurant and Cocktail Lounge. If he did, that thirty-three-year potential would dwindle to three minutes, and Mr. Cutshaw would have to find another place to be generous with his money.

As the bartender reached for the glass, Cutshaw brushed it with his sleeve, tipping it over. The twisted wedge of lime rode out of the glass on a surf of water flanked by half-melted ice.

"Oops. Sorry."

"No problem, Mr. Cutshaw." Costello flagged the little green boat and the runaway icebergs with a swipe of his bar cloth. While he made a fresh vodka and tonic he glanced twice toward Cutshaw.

When Costello set the glass on the bar in front of him, Cutshaw tapped the side of it with his forefinger.

"The ten-year average production of limes in Florida from 1935 to 1944 was 116,000 80-pound boxes." He held up his hand to acknowledge Costello's laughter. The bartender noticed the damp stain on the sleeve of the gray jacket, visible even in the subdued light.

"And there are 94 milligrams of ascorbic acid in a pound of limes. Take some with you on your next ocean cruise to prevent scurvy. But take some vodka also—at least, that's the only way I can get the green devils down.

"Furthermore, I caught those looks you gave me. I'll save you the embarrassment of asking me as you so often and so gently do, 'Don't you think that's enough for tonight, Mr. Cutshaw?' The answer is no, because my lips haven't gone numb yet."

"You know best, Mr. Cutshaw."

"Thank you, Ted." He sighed. "And will I ever get you to call me Asher?"

"Sure—Asher."

"Now, Ted, when this drink is precisely one-third consumed, I plan to make a trip to the restroom." Cutshaw waved his hand vaguely toward a dimly lighted hall at the back of the restaurant

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beyond the tables and booths which were nearly filled with diners. Waiters moved skillfully with trays held high, like tugboats pushing provision barges in a crowded harbor.

"On the way I'll pick up something to bring back."

The bartender leaned toward his customer.

"No, Asher, don't do it. Some day you're going to make one too many trips to the well." Costello's voice was earnest and his cheeks turned pink between the fire of his sideburns.

Cutshaw was not sure if the color in Costello's face was caused by the warmth of the work or depth of emotion. He decided it was the latter. He flexed his long fingers around the glass.

"The world's greatest retired pickpocket must—excuse the expression—keep his hand in."

"But why here? Why not at the airport, or down at the bus station or train depot? Why Dibb's?"

"Good question, Ted, but one I think I've answered for you before. When Florence and I were married her fortune changed my lifestyle. Not that I ever wanted for cash. But she was forty-seven and I was forty-five, and with all that money and no children or other relatives to leave it to, we were what is called conspicuous consumers.

"So there I was, the most skillful dip who ever filched a patch of leather from a buttoned hip pocket, moving in a new social milieu. I began to miss my old trade. Felt the fingers going stiff, and worst of all was the wondering, the insecurity of not knowing whether I had lost both my art and my nerve. That's when I embarked on the most meaningful dipping of my illustrious career which began when I was twelve years old."

He stabbed at the lime in his glass with the stir stick.

"Subways, carnivals, movie lobbies, sports events," he continued, "those are ridiculously easy. When a guy is yelling his head off and jumping up and down at a basketball game or a football game, you can take off his pants and he won't notice the cold. Then you can shake his trousers for loose change after you remove the wallet and he will tell you the coins are in the left-hand pocket, and help yourself."

Asher Cutshaw was warming to his favorite topic. He stopped only when Costello moved down the bar to fill a drink order for one of the cocktail waitresses. When the bartender returned he was still disturbed.

"I know all that, Asher. And I know how you lifted $8600 in

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seventeen minutes at the 1961 Mardi Gras in New Orleans. But why Dibb's now?"

"Ah, yes. I fondly recall. I was known as The Golden Dipper by my peers in those days. I believe I dropped an empty wallet in nearly every street corner mailbox in *Le Vieux Carré*.

"The why of it is the challenge, Ted my boy, the challenge. Do you know how tricky it is to boost a wallet or a purse in a confined place like this? I can't just walk off and mingle with a crowd. And it's not the best place to stash something without being seen."

"Seems to me you could take up some legitimate hobby," Costello said. "Magic, sleight of hand, something like that—especially since you never keep the things you steal."

"But Ted, picking pockets is the ultimate in magic, the absolute last word in sleight of hand. And when it is compounded by returning the wallet to the owner without his knowing, with a fifty-dollar bill of my own tucked in front of his lowly tens, it's worth all the risk and ten times the fifty to see the facial expression when he pays the tab for his dinner."

"That's something I'll never understand, Mr. Cutshaw—Asher—putting good old U.S. of A. money into a stranger's billfold. Make believe you don't know me and you can stuff my wallet like a Thanksgiving turkey fourteen times a day."

Asher Cutshaw smiled. "Without the money I give away it would be just like my vodka and tonic without the lime. Neither is the same without the green."

"I still wish you wouldn't do it here. I've known you nearly three years, ever since Mrs. Cutshaw died, and after you told me a year ago what you were doing I think I started growing my first ulcer—and at my tender age."

There was a faraway look in Cutshaw's eyes. "I have never come close to creating a problem for you or for Dibb's, Ted. I remember I once took a fat wallet from a country type who had it safety-pinned to his pocket. I opened the pin, took out the wallet, then went back in and closed the pin so he wouldn't stab his hand or prick himself when he sat down. That kind of craftsmanship has kept me from getting caught with my hand in the cookie jar.

"I never went the route of using a razor blade on a mark's pants to let his wallet fall into my hands the easy way. That's crude and unsporting. The only time I came close to being caught was when I slid my hand into a pocket and a jagged edge on one of my fin-

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gernails caught on a thread. It happened on a bus. I lurched into this big guy as if I had lost my balance. I got my hand out of there all right, but I felt bad afterward that I had missed his wallet. Since that day I have kept my nails filed."

He extended fingers with carefully manicured nails.

"Okay. So play your risky game. But I wish you would do it earlier in the evening while your hands are steadier." Costello's eyes showed his concern.

Cutshaw ran a forefinger over his neat mustache.

"Tell me something, Ted. No offense, now, because I like both kinds. Are you lace-curtain or shanty Irish?"

Costello held up both his hands, palms out in a gesture of resignation, then moved down the bar to draw two beers.

Asher Cutshaw turned on his bar stool and from his strategic position looked out over the dining area. He decided he should make his move soon, before the evening crowd changed from dinner-hour patrons to the after-show people who would be coming in for cocktails. From his vantage point he surveyed the prospects, taking into consideration the number in the party, whether they were at a table or booth, and—vitally—which dinner course they were eating.

When he had made his decision he gestured to a cocktail waitress approaching the bar. After he spoke to her she left, headed for the kitchen, stuffing something into the pocket of her frilled black apron as she walked away. Her smile was radiant.

On schedule, just as Cutshaw was walking past the table of a man eating dinner alone, a waiter dropped a tray of soiled dishes. Conversation ceased. Every head in the restaurant spun in the direction of the crash. Well, not every head. Not Asher B. Cutshaw's head. He paused a half step in stride on his way to the men's room.

When he returned to the bar he waited until Costello finished making two daiquiris before he motioned to him.

"Look at this," he said. He held out cupped hands so no one but Costello could see. "Isn't that pretty?"

Color drained from the bartender's face. "You—you picked the pocket of a *cop*? Are you crazy? That's a badge and an ID card!"

"Of course. See how shiny he keeps the badge. I had a good look at it in the restroom. Belongs to that nice-looking fellow in the conservative sports jacket and tan slacks sitting alone. See him?"

"Yeah, yeah. I see him all right." Costello bent his knees and

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struggled with an impulse to squat and hide behind the bar.

"His name's Dickerson. Wayne Dickerson. He's a detective lieutenant." Cutshaw rubbed his chin thoughtfully before he continued. "To tell the truth I really thought it was a wallet, it being leather and about the right size. Maybe I'm losing some of my touch." He stared ruefully at his fingers as if they were friends who had betrayed him.

"Boy, just like I told you might happen. You *are* crazy." Costello was whispering hoarsely. "I know we've been friends for nearly three years but this is too much. I'm going down to the other end of the bar. If that cop comes over there and says anything to me I'm going to tell him I don't know you, that tonight's the first time you ever came in here."

Before Costello could walk away Cutshaw's hand touched his arm. He stopped. The long slender fingers opened. There was a small automatic in the palm of Cutshaw's hand.

"Holy—you took his gun too!"

"Speak a little softer, Ted. No. This came from a coat hung on the post of the next-to-last booth, back there by the hallway leading to the restrooms. I gave the coat a quick once-over when I passed by. I couldn't resist scoring a double."

"I still like you, Mr. Cutshaw. But I don't know you." Ted Costello walked as far away as he could, turned his back, and began to rearrange bottles on the backbar.

After the lone diner in the tan slacks finished his dessert and drank the last of his coffee, Asher Cutshaw removed his topcoat from its hanger on the special hook placed on the near wall by Ted Costello two years before. He draped the coat over his arm and joined Lieutenant Dickerson at the cashier's counter. Out of the corner of his eye he noted that the other lone diner had risen from the booth near the back of the restaurant and was putting on his coat.

When he turned, Cutshaw bumped slightly into Dickerson. "Excuse me," he murmured. His eyes never left the figure of the sallow-faced man standing by the booth. The man walked down the hall toward the restrooms, but he did not turn from the hall. He went out the back door at the end of the hall, the door marked Emergency Exit Only.

From his position behind the bar Ted Costello could see Cutshaw and the lieutenant at the cashier's stand; the last three booths to the back were out of his line of vision. When the

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policeman walked out the front door followed shortly after by Cutshaw, the bartender let out a lungful of air that whistled through his teeth. He drew fresh beers for three people at the bar and refilled their bowl with dry-roasted peanuts.

Ten minutes later Asher Cutshaw was back on his favorite barstool. The slack period between the dinner crowd and the after-show people gave Costello breathing room. He checked the five customers at the bar with the roving but unobtrusive eye of the expert bartender. He spoke a few words to two of them as he strolled toward Cutshaw.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Cutshaw. The usual?"

"That's right, Ted. Please put in two limes, I'm celebrating—and call me Asher."

"I take it that means everything went well."

"Of course, doesn't it always?"

"Come on, come on. What happened?"

"Patience, lad. First I returned Lieutenant Dickerson's badge and ID card at the cashier's desk."

"Yeah, I figured that. I saw you nudge him a little. You sure are lucky. But what about the gun?"

Cutshaw waggled a finger. "I keep telling you luck has very little to do with it. It's largely skill and planning. Oh, there's a modicum of chance involved. Such as, I had no way of knowing when I lifted the gun that I would be doing the lieutenant a favor. That makes up for my not putting a fifty-dollar bill in his badge case. Detective lieutenants are quite well paid these days."

"The gun, Asher, the gun—"

"Yes, Ted. I'll get to it. I followed the lieutenant at what the novelists call a discreet distance. Just as he was about to get into his car someone stepped out from behind a car where he must have been crouched waiting. I heard him speak to the lieutenant."

Cutshaw sipped his drink.

He continued, "The man said, 'I been waiting for this, Dickerson, for four years.' Then he did a strange thing. He pulled a bottle out of his pocket and pointed it at the lieutenant. Even from where I stood and in that uncertain light I could see it was a Worcestershire Sauce bottle."

"A what—a bottle?" Costello's voice was incredulous.

"Worcestershire Sauce."

"You're kidding."

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"Then Dickerson pulls out his gun. I thought that made the match a bit lopsided, but then it has been my experience that the law takes every advantage it can. He pushes his sauce assailant across the hood of the car, and over the cursing he has to listen to, he frisks him and starts spouting that Miranda-rights ritual.

"I must say as a professional pocket man I deplore the bull-in-a-china-shop manner in which police search a suspect. While he's busy reciting and putting the handcuffs on his man, I walked over to that little shack where Scott Decker, the Dibb's Restaurant parking lot attendant, snoozes away the evening. After I revived him by waving a greenback under his nose, I gave him the gun to deliver to the man on the hood of the car. I told him to say one of the waiters found it in the booth where the man had eaten his dinner. Also I told Scott to ask why he hadn't paid his check."

"But of course the lieutenant wouldn't let the guy have the gun," Costello said.

"Naturally. He was quite stubborn. For a minute I thought he might shoot Decker. From that point the language coming from the guy on the hood deteriorated rapidly. I gather he had some long-standing grudge having to do with a prison term. The lieutenant had the last word, though. He said, 'I'll bet the boys in ballistics come up with some interesting stuff about this little peashooter.'

"The lieutenant's ire was really aroused, Ted. He told that man—his name is Sporg or Spork, or something like that—he told him he was going to nail him not only for not paying for his dinner but also for stealing that bottle of Worcestershire Sauce. Isn't that the limit?"

"Do I dare inquire how come he had a bottle of sauce with him?" Costello said.

"I thought you'd never ask. It has always been one of my operational rules to leave things as close as I can to the way I find them. After I took the gun—it was a Beretta, by the way—I figured the man might miss the weight in his pocket. The Worcestershire Sauce bottle made the coat handle and hang about the same as it had with the gun."

"But what if he'd reached into his pocket while he was hiding behind the car?"

"I didn't say it was possible to remove *all* the elements of chance. That's part of the kick of it. In the world of the pickpocket you might say chance provides the seasoning—or the sauce."

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a *NEW* short story by

PATRICIA McGERR

Old Mrs. Moore was crippled by arthritis and confined to a wheelchair. But there was nothing wrong with her wits. As her unwelcome guest said, "Smart old lady, aren't you? Thought you could put something over on me" . . .

THE DAY OF THE BOOKMOBILE

by PATRICIA McGERR

Mrs. Moore rolled her wheelchair closer to the window and looked out on her front lawn. It had rained during the night and beads of moisture glistened on the hedge that rimmed the driveway. Across the street a moving van turned into the alley that divided two apartment buildings. Someone coming or going. Everyone is on the move except me.

She closed her eyes for a moment, remembering the block as it had been 30 years earlier. All private homes, a community of friends and neighbors. But one by one the houses had been sold to make way for high-rise apartments, parking lots, and a shopping center. Even the Moore house was not as it had been. Four years ago, after her husband's death, she'd converted the second floor to a separate apartment, keeping the downstairs for herself. And that was fortunate because now, though crippled by arthritis, she was able—with no stairs to climb—to stay alone in her own home and be almost self-sufficient.

Behind the house a wooded area provided, from her kitchen window, a view of the changing seasons. Some day, she told herself, the trees will be cut, the birds and squirrels displaced so more people can huddle in blocks of concrete and glass and park their cars where my house now stands.

She shook off the morbid fancy and looked again out the window. The clouds were thinning, the sun was breaking through. It

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was not a day for gloom. Besides, she remembered, it's Tuesday, and instantly her spirits rose. For Tuesday was the day of the Bookmobile and always, whatever the weather, Tuesday was a fine day. It was not only the fresh supply of reading matter, though she sometimes wondered how she could endure her disability if she weren't able to lose herself, for hours on end, in a new biography or romance or thriller. Even more welcome than the books was the young woman who brought them. If I had a daughter, Mrs. Moore thought, I'd want her to be like Anne Sheldon.

She let the curtain drop and left the window. Switching on the radio to a news and music station, she learned that the ten A.M. temperature was 58 degrees, the humidity 43 percent. Accompanied by the opening strains of a Mozart concerto, she moved on to the kitchen where she laid a lace-edged cloth with matching napkins on a cart, arranged two gold-rimmed china cups and saucers and small silver spoons on the cart, then filled the sugar bowl and poured cream into the pitcher. Later she'd make fresh coffee and heat the cinnamon buns she'd baked the night before.

When the Bookmobile service began, Anne had arrived soon after breakfast, but after a few months she'd altered her route to make Mrs. Moore's house her last stop. With no one else expecting her she was able to sit and chat for half an hour or more. And that visit soon became the social highpoint of Mrs. Moore's week.

The coffee service ready, she pushed the cart into a corner and wheeled back into the living room. The four books she was returning were in their usual place on the table near the door. She picked the top one up and leafed through it. It was a life of Queen Victoria that Anne had particularly recommended. Mrs. Moore had enjoyed it, but with reservations, and she anticipated a lively discussion of the book, pro and con.

As she searched for a specific passage, the doorbell rang. A glance at her watch told her that Anne was early. She hoped that didn't mean she was in a hurry. Returning the book to the top of the stack, she went to open the door with a smile of welcome already on her lips.

But it wasn't Anne. Instead a young man stood there, a stranger carrying a black satchel. A salesman was her first thought, though his attire—jeans and dark blue sweater, high boots and tan jacket—hardly fit that image. Before she could frame a question, he gave her wheelchair a hard shove backward and followed her into the room.

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"What are you doing?" She put both hands on the wheels to steady herself. "Who are you? You can't—"

"Cool it, granny." He banged the door shut and stood with his back against it.

"Get out," she ordered. "You can't force your way into my house without so much as—"

"This says I can." From a jacket pocket he pulled a snub-nosed gun.

"Oh, no!" Her throat tightened as indignation gave way to fear. "What—what do you want?"

"Do what you're told and you won't get hurt. Who's here with you?"

"No one. I live alone."

"Yeah?" He flicked her wheelchair with a skeptical glance. "Let's have a look." He went past her into the little hall that opened onto her bedroom and bath. She wheeled toward the phone, trying desperately to recall the emergency number. 911, that was it. If I can dial that, get the police . . . But he was back before she reached it and, darting past her, jerked the telephone cord from the wall.

"No tricks," he snapped. "Not if you want to stay alive. What's back there?"

"The dining room and kitchen."

He made a quick check and, satisfied, returned to her. The gun was out of sight, marked only by a bulge in his pocket.

"How about upstairs?" he asked her.

"That's a separate apartment. It's rented by a young couple—both are at work."

"So it's just you and me." His thin lips twisted in what was meant to be a smile. He was short and stockily built with small, slightly slanted eyes and a nose that looked as if it had once been broken. "Seems like I lucked into a good place to stay."

"Stay? You can't stay here. Do you need money? I haven't much but—"

"Keep your small change, granny. I'm loaded." He carried his bag to the table and set it down beside the pile of books. Opening the clasps he gazed lovingly at its contents for half a minute, then brought it over to wave in front of her. She saw two rows of neatly stacked bills. "Eyeball that," he gloated. "If you're a real good hostess I may leave you a hundred-buck tip."

"You—you stole that money."

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"Right out of the First National Bank." He sat down beside the now-useless phone and put the bag on the floor beside him.

"Why did you come here? What do you want from me?"

"A hiding place, that's all. As soon as it's dark I'll be on my way." He leaned back in the chair and released his breath in a long sigh. "I'm bushed. That run took it out of me." His eyelids drooped.

Maybe he'll fall asleep, Mrs. Moore thought. If he does and if I can get to the phone extension in the bedroom . . . In the silence she heard the radio. The music had ended and an announcer was giving the news.

"—a bulletin just in. The Valley branch of the First National Bank was held up this morning by a gunman who shot a security guard and escaped with an undisclosed amount of money. We do not yet have a report on the injured man's condition but will bring you more news as we receive it. Now this message—"

"You shot someone!" Mrs. Moore exclaimed.

"The damn fool set off an alarm and spoiled my getaway." He was petulant. "I was going to head for the woods, but the cops came racing up and blocked the way. I was lucky to make it here. Hey, what's happening?" His attention was drawn to the window. "You expecting somebody?"

Mrs. Moore looked past him to see the familiar green and brown station wagon coming up the driveway.

"It's the Bookmobile," she told him.

"Book what?"

"It's a sort of library on wheels for people who can't get out."

"Yeah? That's a nutty idea."

Anne parked the wagon, got out, and walked around to the back to pick out the books. She mustn't walk into danger, Mrs. Moore thought. If only I could signal her to go away, to get help . . .

"Get back out of sight," he said sharply. "And don't start yelling unless you want what I gave the guard. When the book lady rings the bell, don't move. We'll stay under cover until she gives up and goes away."

"I'll be quiet," she promised. And Anne will be safe. She tried not to let her relief show in her voice.

"Hey, wait!" He had a second thought. "She comes here regular?"

"Once a week."

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"And you're always here? Well, where else would you be? Not out for a walk, that's sure. So if you don't answer the bell she'll guess something's wrong and raise an alarm. Smart old lady, aren't you? Thought you could put something over on me. But I'm not that dumb. So here's how it's going to be. You let her in and act natural, the way you do every week. And you can introduce me as—let's see, you got any relations who might come to visit?"

"There's my nephew in Maine. I've talked to her about him."

"That'll do. And don't try to be clever. I'll be standing right here." He posted himself opposite the door. His right hand in his jacket pocket was a silent threat. "If you make a false move or if I get the idea you're trying to give her a message, she'll never leave this house. Understand?"

"Yes, I—I'll do exactly as you say." She took a deep breath. "You're my nephew Cassius who's here for a visit."

"Cajus? What kind of name is that?"

"Italian. His mother is from Rome."

"Yeah?" He grinned crookedly. "I guess I can pass for a spaghetti chomper." The doorbell pealed. He kicked the black bag out of sight under a chair. "Okay, let her in. And remember, Auntie, one word out of line and the two of you will be in big trouble."

She wheeled to the door and opened it. Run, Anne, run, she wanted to shout but, aware of the gun behind her, she held back the words and forced a smile of greeting.

"Good morning, Mrs. M." The girl's voice was vibrant with its usual cheer. "How are you today?"

"I'm fine, dear. And I have company." She turned the wheelchair around to face her captor. For a wild moment she imagined herself rolling forward at top speed to bowl him over. But a bullet can move faster than a wheelchair and she must do nothing that might put Anne in danger. "My nephew is here from Maine. Cassius, this is Miss Sheldon."

"How nice." Anne's smile lighted her face. "Will you be here long?"

"Not very." His hand stayed in his pocket. "I had some business in this area, so I said why not drop in on my aunt."

"I'm sure she's delighted to have you."

"Indeed I am." Mrs. Moore made her voice sound enthusiastic. "I hope he'll stay long enough for me to fatten him up. You've lost weight, Cassius. Doesn't he look lean and hungry, Anne?"

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"I'll stay for lunch anyway," he said.

"But we mustn't keep you here talking," Mrs. Moore said quickly. "I know you have other deliveries to make. Last week's books are there on the table. I hope you've brought me some good new ones."

"There's another by the British veterinarian. I know how much you liked his first two." Anne placed her delivery on the table. "And a couple of good mysteries."

"I always enjoy them."

"Is there anything special you'd like me to bring next Tuesday?"

"One of Shakespeare's plays would be nice. Perhaps *Julius Caesar*."

"I'll be sure to get it." She picked up the books to be returned, and nodded to the intruder. "It was very nice to meet you."

"Likewise." His smile was wolfish. "Sorry I won't be here when you come again."

In a moment she was gone. The man stood near the window to watch her go back to the car. Mrs. Moore felt her pulse rate quicken as she waited, almost without breathing, for the sound of the engine. Then he turned from the window and she released her breath. It was all right. Anne at least was out of danger.

"You did good," he complimented her. "Is anybody else coming?"

"Not today."

"Then how about some chow? What you said about me being hungry was dead right. I missed breakfast." He nodded toward the kitchen. "You got food out there, haven't you?"

"I stewed a chicken yesterday. I can reheat it if you like."

"I'll eat it cold. With beer if you've got it."

"I'm afraid there isn't any."

"Then coffee will have to do." He grasped the metal frame of her chair and propelled it toward the kitchen. "Let's see what else you have."

He was indeed hungry. He ate most of the chicken with several slices of bread and butter, drank three cups of coffee, and ate all the sweet buns she'd made for Anne. As he ate he became more relaxed, but he didn't stop watching her. Nor could she forget the gun in his pocket.

"You better eat something too," he suggested.

"No, I couldn't. I never have much appetite."

They returned to the living room in time to hear a noon news-

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cast. The bank guard, it was reported, had been rushed to the hospital and was in critical condition with a bullet in his chest.

"It's his own fault." He answered her unspoken accusation. "He made trouble for you too. If he hadn't tried to be a hero, I'd be long gone. Tell you what, when I get ready to go, you can put the rest of that chicken in a doggy bag."

"I'll be glad to," she assured him.

When I get ready to go. The words hung in her mind as description of a tantalizingly distant future. It was still many hours until dark. And when the time came, was it realistic to hope that he'd take his bag of money and leave her unharmed? If the guard died, he'd be guilty of murder. Why should he let her stay free to put the police on his trail and testify against him?

"Who's that?" He was again at the window, turning back to look at her with suspicion. "Thought you said you weren't expecting anybody else."

"I'm not." A truck stopped in the driveway. The words *United Delivery Service* were lettered on its side panel. "It must be something I ordered from a store."

"Yeah? What?"

"I don't remember."

Two men got out of the van, opened the truck's back doors, and unloaded a large unwieldy object encased in cardboard.

"What the hell is that?"

"It looks like—" She examined it more closely. "Like a mattress."

"You order a mattress? That's not something you'd forget."

"No. They must have the wrong address."

"Lamebrains! You'd think they'd make sure they had the right house before they carted that heavy thing up here." He waited for them to ring the bell. "Okay, answer the door and send them away."

Again she was conscious of his standing directly behind her. Again she knew the gun was pointed at her back. She opened the door.

"Good day, ma'am." A tall man in gray coveralls put down his end of the box and touched his cap. "Got a delivery for Whitman, Apartment B."

"That's on the second floor," she told him. "But they're not at home in the daytime."

"Yeah?" He frowned, looked at the paper in his hand, and

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brightened. "The order says to leave it with the lady downstairs. That must be you. Okay, Joe, let's take it in."

"Wait a minute," the man behind her objected. "You can't fill up her place with that big thing. Bring it back when the people who bought it are home."

"It's all right," she told him. "I often take in the Whitmans' packages."

"Make up your mind." The delivery man was impatient. "If you won't accept it, I'll call the store and ask them what to do. You've got a phone, haven't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"It's all right," the gunman cut her off. "There's no need to make a federal case out of it. Let them bring the damn thing in."

"Excuse me, ma'am." Moving quickly, the man in gray maneuvered the oblong package past her so that she was isolated in a corner, cut off from the rest of the room. A phrase from a novel about gang warfare sprang to her mind. "To the mattresses." It made an effective barricade. Perhaps she might, under its cover, whisper a warning to the second delivery man . . . While her thoughts were still whirling, trying to form a plan, the advance man spoke a sharp command.

"Okay, buster, pull that hand out of your pocket. Slow and easy. And empty. That's the way. Now raise 'em both high."

Resting his burden against the wall, the second man went to join his partner. Mrs. Moore rolled to a spot where she could see round the corner of the box. Her captor was standing with both hands above his head. The advance man kept his gun trained on him while the one called Joe removed the weapon from the intruder's jacket pocket and then clicked on handcuffs that locked his arms behind his back.

"You—" She stared at the two men in gray. "You're police officers."

"That's right, ma'am. Sergeant Cleary. And Detective Williams." He looked at her more closely. "Are you all right?"

"I am now." She put her hand to her throat, finding it hard to breathe as the terror she had so long suppressed suddenly broke free.

"You want me to call a doctor?"

"No, I—I'll be fine." She looked once more at her unwelcome guest. Shackled between the policemen he was no longer a menacing figure.

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"Okay, buster, let's go downtown. The folks there will be mighty pleased to see you." His eyes searched the room, discovered the black bag. "And this too." He picked it up and turned back to Mrs. Moore. "Somebody will be out later to take your statement."

Sullenly the prisoner let himself be hustled through the door. Sergeant Cleary spoke to someone outside.

"All right, miss. You can go in now."

Anne Sheldon came swiftly into the room, dropped to her knees beside the wheelchair, and clasped Mrs. Moore's hand.

"He didn't hurt you, did he?" she asked.

"He only frightened me." She managed a faint smile. "And I'll get over that. I'm very glad you came back."

"I thought you'd want company for a while. The police told me to wait outside until he was in custody."

"It was you who called them?"

"Yes. I phoned from the drugstore on the corner. When I described the man, they were sure it was the one who held up the bank this morning."

"I didn't know whether you got my message. I couldn't be any clearer without making him suspicious."

"You were clear enough." Anne squeezed her hand. "The minute I came in I could tell you were on edge about something. You're not usually in such a rush to get rid of me."

"No." She smiled, returned the pressure. "I look forward to our discussions."

"What clinched it was your asking for a copy of *Julius Caesar*." Her eyes went to the bookcase behind Mrs. Moore. "I know what a fine set of Shakespeare you have. With his complete works on your shelf it didn't make sense to ask for one of his plays. As soon as I got back to the car I was able to put it all together."

" 'Yon Cassius,' " Mrs. Moore quoted, " 'has a lean and hungry look.' "

"With that as a start," Anne said, "it wasn't hard to add the last line of Caesar's speech. 'Such men are dangerous.' "

"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

The two stories that follow are the 509th and 510th "first stories" to appear in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a double debut in print with an interesting "story behind the stories" . . .

Last year we received a first story, read it, liked it, and were about to purchase it when an extraordinary thing happened—extraordinary for EQMM. For the first time in the 36 years of this magazine your Editor lost a manuscript! We looked on and in every place we could think of—desk tops, desk drawers, files, piles, under and behind our favorite reading chairs, upstairs and downstairs, everywhere—and could not find that manuscript. Luckily we had a note of the author's name, but unluckily we had no address; so we didn't know where in the world, literally, to write for a carbon of the manuscript.

We alerted our staff: watch for a letter from Helene Melyan, asking why she hadn't heard from us about her story, or why she hadn't at least got back her manuscript. And lo, one day this year a member of the staff spotted not a letter from the author but a second story submitted by Helene Melyan.

Immediately we wrote to the author and explained what had happened, requesting another copy of her first story. Mrs. Melyan complied, and in her accompanying letter graciously forgave your Editor. "Once in 36 years," she wrote, "even Mr. Queen is entitled to lose a manuscript."

So now we give you Mrs. Melyan's two first stories, back to back, and in the preface to the second story we will tell you a little about her. . .

"Q"

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WRITING WAS HER LIFE

by HELENE MELYAN

Groaning inwardly, Frank looked up from the manuscript and met Myrna's expectant smile. What could he say? This story was as bad as all the others his wife had written; no, on second thought, it was worse. And being asked to read it at four in the morning was, as usual, straining the quality of his editorial mercy.

"The heroine is a writer," said Myrna cheerfully. All Myrna's heroines were writers. Now that she was writing mystery stories, they were writers who either died brutal deaths or survived to track down killers. When she had written children's stories last year, her heroines had been bespectacled little girls who wanted to grow up to be writers. The year before that, in her women's-magazine period, they had been housewives who wrote saccharine poetry while their husbands were away at the office. Frank knew what Myrna did while he was away at the office. She slept. At night, when he was trying to sleep, she wrote.

"Of course it's just the first three chapters, but I think you'll get the idea of what I'm trying to do here. Now tell me, darling, what do you think of my motivation?"

Frank smiled weakly. "Fine. Wonderful motivation. Now can I go back to sleep?"

"Of course, dearest," cooed Myrna, snatching her manuscript. "But not too soundly. I should have the fourth chapter finished in an hour."

She hurried out of the bedroom, as usual forgetting to turn off the lights or shut the door. In a moment the sound of her typing would again assail Frank's ears. He had been dreaming, lately, of tap dancers, machine guns, drummers—anything that went rat-a-tat-tat, like Myrna's typewriter. All night long.

Frank had known before he married her that Myrna was a writer, unpublished but nonetheless gifted in the opinion of every doting relative who had been allowed to read her work. Frank had found her ambition quite charming, even a little pathetic. He decided she needed to be protected from a world full of unsympathetic editors and overzealous critics, and Myrna at once agreed. They were married after a heady courtship about which

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Myrna wrote three short stories, one novella, and an execrable two-act play.

It was only on their honeymoon, three years ago, that Frank learned two other facts. Myrna had what she called a "creative flow" every night between one o'clock and six; and the wonderful thing about it, according to Myrna, was that she now had a live-in audience with whom she could and would share her creative flow the instant it was captured on paper.

"You mustn't be jealous, darling," Myrna had told him on their wedding night, as she left his embraces and unpacked her portable typewriter. "Writing is my first love." To soothe his feelings, she wrote and had him read that very night an absolutely tender story about a writer who discovered the joys of marriage and shortly thereafter died of an incurable illness.

Myrna, however, did not die. The story was never published, nor were any of the hundreds of absolutely tender, witty, dramatic, or spine-tingling efforts that Myrna churned out night after night. Frank had once been confident the growing mountain of rejection slips on Myrna's desk would eventually dampen or smother her enthusiasm, but Myrna proved surprisingly resilient. Writing, she explained, was her life.

Which probably explained why she had no time left to cook or clean the apartment, Frank thought miserably, pulling on his socks and squinting at the clock. True to her word, she had returned in an hour with Chapter Four. What little sleep Frank had gleaned had been perforated by the steady rat-a-tat-tat of Myrna at work. Apparently the woman never paused to think, only occasionally to change the ribbon. "Myrna, I want a divorce," he yawned. "Myrna, are you listening?"

Myrna, luxuriously asleep, as she would be for the next ten hours, didn't answer. She would be wide-awake when he came home that night, and she would excitedly plot her next story while they ate lukewarm TV dinners. While he did the dishes and swept, she would be stretched out on the sofa, reading *The Writer's Guide*. While he watched TV, she would be taking a long hot bath, and thinking. (Myrna did her best thinking while she was in the tub. A lot of writers did, Myrna said.) Then, when he crept off to sleep, Myrna would don her best housecoat, rub her hands with anticipation, and sit down at her desk in the living room, waiting for her creative flow.

Frank had been trying to talk to Myrna about a divorce for a

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year now. There was no getting through to her. When she was not asleep, she was writing. When she was not writing, she was thinking about writing. Frank put on his jacket, stuffed his feet into his shoes, and stumbled out for a quick breakfast.

On the table there was something waiting for him—a thick stack of typewritten pages, and a note: "Darling, I finished the story, but I just couldn't wake you—you were sleeping like an absolute *bear*. Please read chapters one through six before leaving for work and make pertinent comments in the margins. (Don't use ink!) And darling, please note: Are you sure my motivation is strong enough? After all, we are talking about murder!!! Love, Myrna."

Frank picked up a pencil and began reading. If he didn't, he knew from experience that chapters one through six would be waiting for him at dinner.

"He was a peaceful man, a good man; but pushed to the point of desperation, he felt no longer responsible for his actions. He had endured the unendurable. Now he would, perhaps, do the unthinkable."

"Good motivation," Frank wrote in the margins. "Very good, excellent motivation."

"She came in at three a.m. with a stack of pages in her arms, turned on the light, pulled back the covers, and he was waiting for her—fully dressed, with his service revolver in his hand. The pages fell to the floor. With the God-given perception of a true writer, she saw what he had in mind. Murder."

"You know," Frank wrote frantically in the margins, "the writing is awful, but I love the motivation."

" 'Type,' he said, pressing the gun against her neck. 'We're going to make it look like suicide. Now shut up and type what I tell you.' And so, her trembling fingers somehow finding the keys, she typed, as his voice droned on, the words becoming more and more unreal."

Frank wrote, "Absolutely inspirational."

"Type," he said, later that night, pressing the gun against her neck. "We're going to make it look like suicide. Now shut up and type what I tell you." And so, her trembling fingers somehow finding the keys, she typed, as his voice droned on, the words becoming more and more unreal.

"The Very Last Story by Myrna Kugel," he dictated grimly.

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Mrs. Melyan is a 34-year-old housewife and mom. She writes a weekly column for the Portland newspaper, the "Oregonian." The column is usually devoted to local events, reported with a light touch, and what Mrs. Melyan describes as "family humor." She has also had nonfiction pieces in "Reader's Digest," "Cat Fancy," and "Grit." Her hobbies include "reading, doodling, and thinking about doing the gardening. . ."

NIGHT AND DAY

by HELENE MELYAN

People used to say we were as close as brothers, Steve and I, and as different as night and day. I was small and dark and quiet. Steve, only two months my senior, was big and blond and full of the devil. From the time we were five until we were twelve, he was my protector, my confidant—my friend.

I was the smallest kid on the block, and the brightest. Folks said, "Watch out for that one. He's going to go places some day. Of course, he's got to get a little meat on his bones first." I winced when they said that. Steve was the only one who never kidded me about my size, or my glasses, or my being bright. He was just always there when I needed him, in his calm, good-natured way, ready to turn into a tiger if somebody needled me, or called me "weasel," the way some of the big kids did.

But with me Steve was always gentle. Once, when we were playing cops and robbers, he got a little too rough and accidentally knocked the wind out of me; and I saw tears in his round blue eyes, until I was back on my feet and smiling at him again, telling him it was all right.

We played cops and robbers a lot in those days. Steve was always the robber—or the cowboy in the black hat, or the invader from outer space, or the monster risen from the deep. And I, always, was the hero. Through hundreds of days of summer I chased him, breathless, finger-shot him as he hid under porches or lurked behind trees, in the end always bringing him in, squirming and cursing, to justice; or else I killed him with my blazing

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index finger, and watched as he died picturesquely at my feet. And when he died, it was always with a snarl on his lips, and last words hurled at me in bitter triumph, "Damned copper!"

Steve was never very good in school, and Ma sometimes told me she wished I'd make other friends, nicer ones. But Steve was the only real friend I ever had, or wanted. When we moved to another town, the year I was twelve, I thought the world would end. It didn't. I met other kids, found other interests, and life went on, only a little bit lonelier. Once I heard my parents talking about Steve—they'd heard he dropped out of school, ran off somewhere. Pa said he'd always known he'd come to no good. I worked hard, made good grades, got accepted to college. I didn't see Steve for 15 years.

Until this morning, in the bank. I felt the gun in my back, heard the deep voice warn, "Hold it right there, buddy. Now drop the gun." As I slowly turned my head, I saw him. Taller, bigger, as blond as ever. I would have known him anywhere.

I let the gun in my hand slide to the floor, raised my arms, and turned to face him. And that's when I knew that Steve recognized me, too; because when he snapped the handcuffs on me and read me my rights, there were tears in his round blue eyes.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 511th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a glimpse of Southern living. . .

The author, Janet Rechtman, is thirty years old and employed as the assistant to the president of a small advertising agency. She has lived in the South virtually all her life, residing now in Atlanta, Georgia. Her academic background includes an M.A. in Victorian studies and current courses at Emory University in the "field of sociology of religion." She jogs, sews, and sings "in descending levels of skill and frequency." She is also a baseball fan, a dog lover, and "a devout Atlantan". . .

SILENT GOOD GRACE

by JANET RECHTMAN

Lordamercy! Sister here's been this way for nearly 35 years, ha'nt ya, sister. She don't say much, not since it happened, but you kinda know she's always thinking, ain't you, I'm talking to you, sister. Just tears me up to see her in that wheelchair, can't go nowhere, not even to church seeing as how we can't get her down them stairs we got out front. She can't walk a lick. Paralyzed, don't you know. From the hips down. Reverend Pitcher'll come by to see her every once in a while but I figure even if she got to church, she wouldn't have anything to say, so she might as well not say it here, ain't that so, sister. The Lord works in mysterious ways.

Me and sister here, we're both twins, not to each other, of course, you see, we're six years apart. It's funny, kinda, her twin being dead and her as good as dead while me and Bubba, we're still going strong, him in the city and me here in the old home place. Yep. Kinda funny. Sister, you ever think about that much? What you say? Don't know why I keep on listening, she ain't had nothing to say for years.

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Yep. It's been a whole lot of years. Sister is 64 right now, guess that means I'm about 70. Why, I remember when we was little girls, she was the cutest thing. Seeing as I was the oldest, I had to look after her and Aneetha, that's her twin, and they used to be devils, let me tell you. Sister, you remember that time you and 'Neetha went swimming down at the sawmill and both of you like to drowned? Lord, if I hadn't come up on them at the right time, they'd both be swimming today in God's green pond. I remember I used to tell mamma, Mamma, 'Neetha and Sister, they's bad ones and mamma'd say back, no, honey, they just high-spirited. They'll grow up and be okay.

I reckon mamma didn't believe that, the day sister cut 'Neetha's hair. She used to have this real long dark hair, remember 'Neetha's hair, sister, 'course you do. And one day this one decided it was time for 'Neetha to have a bob. She took mamma's sewing scissors and cut them two braids off, one at the time, 'bout an inch below the scalp. Was mamma ever mad. I told her so, though, she shouldn't ought to a been surprised like that.

'Course it wasn't all pranks and rapscallions in those days. We worked hard, mamma sewing in the factory in town, daddy, well, daddy mostly worked on cars in the front yard. There was five children, us two sets of twins and J.D., the oldest boy who we ain't heard from since he went off to fight the Japanese. You shoulda seen him all dressed up in that uniform, remember, sister, you and 'Neetha couldn't hardly keep your hands off a him or them army friends he brought round. I kept telling mamma she better watch out, seeing as how we Brogans tended to twins, there might be another pair needing nursing if somebody didn't explain things to sister, and I mean explain things quick.

Me, I didn't have no part of that, seeing as how I planned to finish school and get me a good job when the time came, not end up housewifing a lot of babies, their daddy included. Kinda made me feel bad, though, seeing how those stupid men paid all that attention to 'Neetha and sister instead of asking about a steady, smart girl like myself. If they only coulda seen what was coming, 'Neetha dead, sister like she is, they'da known a bargain when they was one to be had, isn't that so, sister, you reckon one of those fellas'd take care of you like I done? Huh, sister, what you think of that?

Oh, baby sister, you cried and cried, remember, when one of them soldier boys came back to tell you 'Neetha and John Snead

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done got killed, run over by a train at the factory crossing. Lord, you always was the baby. I held you and held you, crying like that, while mamma went over to the church to make the arrangements for the funeral. I was the one who took care of you all through that time, Lord rest 'Neetha in eternal peace, and what's the first thing you up and did but run off with some soldier, don't even say thank you ma'am never mind but done gone and broke your mamma's heart.

But that's all over, ain't it, sister, a bygone be bygone, it ain't to us to question the vindication of the holy judgments of the Lord. You and me both built our crosses and will bear them, me being so proud, you being so skittish, huh, sister, ain't it the truth. It was a fine day the day we both decided to submit to His will and take what the Lord would give us, poor little baby sister, and I know if the Lord had wanted me not to hit you on that road coming back after all those years, my eyes would have been opened and the car would have stopped. I waited and prayed it would happen, I did, held my foot over the brake pedal just waiting for the Lord to make my foot move. Lordamercy, little sister, you know I'd never hurt you on purpose, never ever take away your strength or your spirit. No. It was a lesson and a chastisement from God. Knowing that makes me able to take on the burden of your care in the true spirit of charity, little sister, and I hope and pray that's why you accept the will of the Lord in such silent good grace.

"Q"

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a *NEW* detective story by

MIGNON WARNER

Meet Mrs. Charles, clairvoyante and crime consultant, and her friend ex-Detective Chief Superintendent David Sayer, who had "an instinct for murder backed up by thirty years of experience with that kind of crime."

The case involved Bert Beatty, aged 59, and his wife Janice, aged 19—but the crucial point in the strange affair involved an obsession that made Bert Beatty's life a hell on earth. . .

THE FIFTY-SECOND CARD

by MIGNON WARNER

"She killed him—as true as I'm sitting here, she killed him! What was the line from that bit of doggerel we used to sing as kids? Something about going to the funeral, but just for the ride . . . Well, that was exactly what Janice Beatty did today. She went to her husband's funeral all right, but you can take my word for it, Madame, it was just for the ride!"

Mrs. Charles considered David Sayer thoughtfully. She had never seen him so angry, so upset and embittered about anything or anybody. If he went on like this for much longer, she thought, he would make himself quite ill, perhaps even precipitate another heart attack.

"Bert was my friend, but I have to say it," David continued with a scowl. "He was a silly old fool. And I regret now that I didn't have the courage to tell him so to his face. He'd be alive today. We all knew that he was making an idiot of himself over her. A man of fifty-nine marrying a nineteen-year-old. I ask you, Madame!"

The clairvoyante regarded him with a mixture of mild concern and interest. That was twice now in a short space of time that he had called her "Madame." He wanted something—a favor. He was

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always very formal when he wanted to ask something of her, and the bigger and more personal the favor, the longer he took to get round to asking it.

He went on, "But how on earth do you prove it, that's what I'd like to know?"

The clairvoyante gave him a quizzical look. "That, coming from you, an ex-Detective Chief Superintendent of Police?"

He made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "I could make you a list as long as my arm of the names of people whom I know for a fact have been guilty of committing one crime or another, including murder, and the police have never stood one chance in a million of proving it. More villains get away with crime, especially today, than are ever caught—I mean, than are ever actually tried and prosecuted for their crimes.

"Like Janice Beatty. I know she murdered her husband, but neither I nor the Gidding police, if I went to them with my suspicions, will ever be able to prove it. Though with what I've got to go on," he went on in a disgruntled aside, "I'd have about as much hope of getting the Gidding police to take any notice of me as you'd have if you suddenly took it into your head to pay them a visit and announced to all and sundry that you'd seen it in your crystal ball. They'd think I was nuts, too, and—"

He broke off and came back to the clairvoyante with a quick apologetic smile. "You'll forgive me, Madame. I meant no offense to you; and I think, at least, I *hope* you understand what I mean."

Mrs. Charles smiled faintly. They had been good friends now for what seemed like a long time. But he still couldn't come to terms with her profession. His prejudices were as deep-rooted today as they were that cold winter's day (how long ago was it—four, five years?) when he first came to see her and accused her of murder. He respected her, and admired her, she knew that, but he didn't understand her, and he never would.

"The lady in question obviously employed some quite ingenious method of disposing of her husband," Mrs. Charles observed quietly.

David gave her a sharp look. There, she did it again! Was she asking him? Or telling him? Sometimes . . . He shook his head in bewilderment. How did you begin to understand someone like her, someone who always seemed to know not only most of if not all the answers, but the questions as well, and long before they were asked?

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"No?" said the clairvoyante when he continued to shake his head and said nothing.

"I was just thinking, Madame . . . Wondering how it is I never seem to catch you unawares, and that that sad state of affairs is reserved strictly for me."

She smiled again. "In what way do you suspect that your friend's wife was able to effect his death?"

He sighed deeply. "I'd like to be able to say with some kind of deadly poison, the type that can't be traced; but—" He paused and shook his head. "Cardiac arrest—a plain or common-garden-variety heart attack. He collapsed and died at the wheel of his car. There was a post-mortem—"

"But no trace of deadly poison," said the clairvoyante, concealing her quiet amusement at the forlorn expression on his face.

"No," he said dejectedly.

"Had your friend any previous history of heart disease?"

"Yes." David sighed again. "Bert had a near fatal coronary about nine or ten years ago, a year or so before I had mine. Then a couple of weeks before he married Janice—this would've been about three months ago—he had another mild heart attack. His doctor warned him then that the marriage would probably be the end of him. Janice was never your comfy chairs, briar pipe, and warm slippers round the log-fire type. Right from the word go she liked and wanted a good time. And so did Bert, I admit that; but that was before the onset of the coronary disease, and his heart simply couldn't stand the pace."

Mrs. Charles studied him for a moment. Then she said, "In those circumstances, especially when one takes into consideration the prenuptial medical advice, and the fact that your friend would, I'm sure, have been fully aware of the kind of girl he was about to make his wife, one could hardly accuse the poor girl of murder simply because she continued to live her life in accordance with what you yourself have admitted was her nature. Forgive me for saying this, but are you quite sure you're not letting your dislike for this young woman color your thinking?"

There was almost a full minute's absolute silence while David considered the clairvoyante's question.

"You said something to me once when I called on another occasion to ask your advice," he said at length, "and I have never forgotten it . . . that you hadn't had my experience with murderers." He paused and his expression became stern and forbidding. "I do

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not deny, Madame, that I dislike Janice Beatty, but heaven forbid that dislike and dislike alone for a person would ever bring me to call anyone a murderer. Not that long ago I came here to your home and called you a murderer, but dislike never came into it, even though I willingly confess that at the time I had no great liking or regard for your profession. My judgment of you was incorrect, but it was based on what I took to be the cold hard facts of the case as I saw them at that time."

"And what are the cold hard facts of this case, Superintendent?" she inquired.

His features relaxed round a small self-conscious grin.

"You've got nothing at all to go on?" The clairvoyante looked and sounded mildly surprised.

"Only my instincts," he said, shrugging. "Or more precisely, an instinct for murder backed by thirty years of experience with that kind of crime."

"And how does one prove the crime of murder with only one's instincts to go on?"

"That's just it. You don't. The villain gets away with it."

The clairvoyante made no immediate comment. She could tell by the look on David's face that he expected her to disagree with him. His faith in her was sometimes quite touching, all the more so for his lack of true understanding of her. After a moment she said, in a faintly reproving voice, "I regret, Superintendent, that I cannot work miracles, much as I would like to be able to."

He seemed to start, as if she had shocked him out of a deep trance. "Good grief, Madame! The thought never entered my head! No"—he paused, shaking his head vigorously—"that young lady has got away with it. You have the wrong idea altogether. It wouldn't be fair to ask you to take on the impossible. It wasn't why I came—"

A degree of hesitation in his voice belied the protest and laid bare the subconscious hope that through the clairvoyante he might be able to find the key to the impossible. "I simply stopped by on my way back to Gidding because I wanted to ask your advice about a pack of cards."

"The Tarot?"

"No. Just an ordinary pack of playing cards. Well, not so ordinary, maybe. I wondered if you could give me some idea of what they might be worth, or tell me where I might take them to be valued?"

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He reached inside his jacket and removed a pack of cards which he handed to her.

"The entire pack was collected," he explained. "By that I mean each card individually. As you can see from the design on the back, they belong to the same pack, so to speak, but only three of them, I understand, came from any one pack. The rest were collected and added one by one over a long period of time to make up a full pack.

"They belonged to my friend Bert Beatty, the man we've been talking about, and as I've said, it took him quite some while, the best part of his life, to collect them all. He's left them to me"—he shrugged and looked a trifle embarrassed—"and I suppose, really, that the nice thing to do, out of respect for him and our long friendship, would be to hang on to them, but I know what will happen if I do. They'll only end up fodder for the silverfish, lost in some dark forgotten corner of the attic, and probably be thrown away in years to come—after I go—as just so much worthless old junk. I'm sure Bert would feel much happier if he knew they had gone to someone with his kind of obsession for collecting things rather than to have that happen to them."

Mrs. Charles was examining the playing cards, a quite ordinary-looking pack, with no particularly outstanding design on its back; in fact the clairvoyante could find nothing at all which suggested to her that the pack might be valuable—something she very much doubted anyway, if the cards had been collected singly. She couldn't see a true collector of valuable playing cards breaking into any of his packs (not the valuable ones!) to sell David's late friend a single card from one of them.

"Your friend collected other things?" she asked after a few moments.

"No. Just that pack of cards. He started, I believe, as a youngster when he found the three cards I've already mentioned lying in the street one day. He traveled all over the world in his search for the other cards—wrote to heaven only knows how many card collectors in how many different countries, spent hundreds of pounds on advertisements. There's one missing, incidentally. Will that matter, affect their value?"

"I'm no expert," she said, shaking her head slowly. "I would feel more qualified to advise you if it were a pack of Tarot cards; however, I should have thought that the missing card would diminish any value that the pack may have. One of my brother's friends,

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an amateur magician, collects rare playing cards, and I'm sure he would be able to give you the advice you want. I could get Cyril to have a word with him for you if you would like."

"Please, Madame. I would be obliged to you. And to your brother," he added.

"What a pity your friend failed to complete the pack before he died."

"Yes," he agreed. "It was the only thing that kept him alive."

"Not his love for his sweet young wife?" said the clairvoyante with a twinkle in her eye.

"No," replied David, very serious. "It was that damned—you'll pardon me, Madame," he apologized quickly, "pack of cards." He hesitated and became thoughtful. "As a matter of fact, I think that in the end it was beginning to prey on his mind—you know, the thought that when he did finally locate the last card it would be the death of him. Understandable, I suppose. I mean, that something could get to you like that. And it just goes to show you how hollow that sort of thinking is."

"Indeed it does," she said. "What card was it? Did he tell you?"

"The seven of clubs." He laughed dryly. "He talked about it often enough—in fact, almost constantly. That was really why he left the pack to me—compensation, he said, for all the years I'd put up with him and his being obsessed by them." He paused. "Is something wrong, Madame?"

The clairvoyante was quiet for a moment, then she shook her head and said, "No, Superintendent. I was just thinking. It's an interesting card, and all the more interesting because it was the final one."

She fell silent and the color of her eyes deepened with the intensity of her thoughts. He had watched her eyes darken like that before and it always meant the same thing: there *was* something wrong, not necessarily anything to worry about, but definitely something wrong.

"The seven of wands," she mused out loud. "Success against overwhelming odds. Don't you find that curious, Superintendent?"

"I'm sorry, Madame. I don't follow you."

"The seven of wands in the Tarot corresponds with the seven of clubs in the ordinary pack of playing cards and that—success, victory over seemingly insurmountable odds—is one of its meanings . . . the meaning I would attribute to it in the prevailing circumstances.

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"Well," she said, leaning forward and placing the pack on the table between them, "I shall be seeing Cyril later this evening, then we will see what his friend says and take it from there."

He nodded. "Odd thing to do," he remarked pensively. "Collecting a pack of cards that way, like Bert did, and making it so tough, limiting himself to no more than a single card from any one individual source. He kept elaborate files of the names and addresses of all the card collectors he'd corresponded with over the years—could tell you in a flash who had sold him what, and when; and he was the last person you'd expect to have that sort of obsession, an obsession of any kind."

He hesitated, a distant look in his eye. "You know, it was a kind of madness; and I suppose that's really what an obsession is. A form of insanity. About eighteen months ago Bert got wind of a card—this was when he had only the last one, the seven of clubs, to go—and he was quite beside himself over it. There was some confusion between him and the chap who owned it—somehow Bert got the idea that it was the missing seven of clubs, and when he found out that he was mistaken—it turned out to be one of the clubs he already had, the four—I honestly thought he was going off his head. I've never seen anyone in such a state, and it went on and on for days—put a terrible strain on our friendship.

"The chap with the four was under the impression he was on to a good thing because he thought he had the final card—Bert had rather foolishly let on to him how desperate he was to get hold of it—and that didn't help matters any. They actually came to blows over it. Bert wanted the card, even though he had the four, so that he could use it to swap, but he wasn't prepared to pay the chap's asking price. The thing ended up in court. Nasty business." He shook his head and pulled a face. "In the end they more or less shook hands and settled out of court."

"What about the additional card? Did your friend buy it?"

"I never asked. I didn't dare to bring up the subject. By that time I was up to here"—he chucked his hand under his chin—"with Bert and his blessed cards!"

Mrs. Charles picked up the pack and dealt the cards face up on to the table. There was a moment or two of silence and then she said, "There's only one four of clubs—" She dealt out another dozen or so cards, then paused and raised her head.

It was some while before David responded to the query in her eyes. He sat there stupefied, shaking his head.

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"The seven of clubs," he murmured when he finally found his voice again. "But it can't be! I was talking to Bert on the phone only a couple of hours before his fatal heart attack and he told me he still hadn't found it. He was telling me he thought he had a lead—a collector in South America, someone he'd never heard of before, and he was going to write off to him that day."

Mrs. Charles gazed thoughtfully at him. Then removing the seven and putting it to one side, she dealt out the remaining cards, counting as she went. "Fifty-one," she said at length. "Plus the seven. Fifty-two. A complete deck. But now we'll make sure."

"What are you looking for?"

"The deadliest poison of all, Superintendent," replied the clairvoyante. "A poison which attacks the mind, kills, and leaves no trace." She hesitated. "Are you quite certain that the misunderstanding between your friend and the man with the four involved the seven of clubs?"

David scratched his chin. "Yes, fairly certain—though I tended to go a bit deaf when Bert started on about those cards." He paused and thought it over. "No, I think I've got that right—because of the court case I paid attention to what was going on."

Mrs. Charles nodded. "Perhaps," she said, "it might be as well to see what's here, or not here, as the case may be"; and then between them they sorted the cards into their respective suits.

"All present and correct," said David eventually, looking up at the clairvoyante over the four neat piles of cards.

"And no additional four of clubs," she said meditatively.

She went quickly through the suit of clubs, removed the seven, and studied it.

"Tell me about this young woman, Janice," she said quietly.

He smiled. "Don't tell me you can gaze in that card like a crystal ball and see all the answers."

"Yes, Superintendent. As a matter of fact, that is exactly what I can do."

He wanted to laugh, but checked himself in time. He stared at her for a moment, then shrugged and said, "Well, what do you want to know?"

"Everything. Start with her family background."

"Pretty awful," he said. "Large family. Very little money. Her father was an alcoholic and a convicted wife and child beater. Janice spent most of her childhood running away from home. That, incidentally, was how she and Bert met. In the juvenile

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court. Bert was a magistrate. He took an interest in her—fatherly, to begin with, then later on—well, it's the old old tale and I think you can fill in that part of the story for yourself.

"Bert was wealthy with a big home and represented everything she'd always wanted and never known. Comfort and security. I don't suppose you can blame the girl for grabbing what she could and not giving a damn how she went about it or for anyone who might get hurt in the process. Heaven knows she'd been hurt enough. But—"

He paused and sighed. "Well, I don't imagine anybody could be kicked around the way she'd been all her young life and stand much hope of ending up a nice person. Maybe a psychiatrist would have some fancy explanation for it and tell us that killing Bert was her way of settling the score for all the old hurts. In her eyes it wasn't even poor old Bert she gave the push, it was her father. Or something of the sort."

"How did she earn a living?"

"By thieving," said David simply. "She even stole stuff—cash and some of the family silver—from Bert . . . this was while he was trying to help her and before love sweet love blossomed between them."

"She never had any regular employment?"

"Not the kind one would wish to speak of in police company."

"I see." Mrs. Charles paused. "She never worked for a magician, as his assistant, perhaps?"

"No," said David in a slow thoughtful voice. "Not to my knowledge. But one of her ex-boy friends was a magician. Interested in magic, that is. Or so Bert told me. There was quite a bit of trouble between Bert and Janice over him. Janice had started seeing him again—since she'd got married, I mean—and Bert put his foot down. Tried to. I don't think it made any difference. She still went on seeing the fellow."

"You say he was interested in magic. Card magic?"

He nodded slowly. And after a moment so did she.

"Then that, Superintendent, is how the young lady, probably in league with her gentleman friend, murdered her husband. Like you, perhaps even better than you, she knew that acquiring the seven of clubs had become an obsession, a mania bordering on insanity with him, and that that mania, in all probability as a result of his low state of health, had in turn become a terrible, obsessive fear.

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"He wanted the seven of clubs desperately, but he grew to be terrified of it. It became for him like a card from the suit of swords or spades, a symbol of great misfortune, which he translated into meaning death, *his* death. He was terribly torn—he had a compulsion to complete the deck, and yet he knew, the moment he got that card, the seven of clubs, he would die. And that is exactly what happened."

"Are you saying that somehow Janice got hold of the missing seven and gave it to Bert knowing—*hoping*—it would hasten the moment of his death and her wealthy widowhood?"

Mrs. Charles smiled a little. "Not the missing seven, Superintendent. *This* card."

He gave her a puzzled look.

"This seven of clubs is a fake, Superintendent; in my opinion, a very clever forgery indiscernible to the naked eye. The back is genuine, but not the front. This card was originally two cards. The back came from a four of clubs—from the card which your friend found himself in court over and I believe ultimately purchased from his adversary, and the front is a seven of clubs taken from a pack of similar manufacture but with a different design on its back. Both cards have been carefully split in halves and then rejoined so that the seven of clubs had the correct design on its back to match the rest of your friend's pack."

David took the card from her and examined it closely.

"Can that be done?" he asked doubtfully.

"It can—most definitely. But it requires skill and know-how. I personally know of a magician, one skilled in card magic, who would be only too delighted to fake an entire pack of playing cards for you in this fashion. It's quite common practice with card magicians."

"The skill and know-how of a magician, eh?" David shook his head wonderingly. "The cunning little—it's perfect!"

"No, Superintendent," said the clairvoyante softly. "If I am right about that card—and I do not for one moment doubt that I am—then perfect it can never be."

He stared at her for a long moment, then a slow smile crossed his face and the glint of battle about to begin showed bright in his eye. "No, I don't suppose it can be, can it? And now, thanks to you, Madame, the forensic lads at Gidding and I will prove it."

Mrs. Charles smiled at him. "Yes, Superintendent, I'm quite sure you will."

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME DOSSIER

by OTTO PENZLER

GREAT DETECTIVE: Once every few years or so, we get lucky and something special happens to revitalize our conviction that no literary form is as satisfying as the novel, and that many of the best novels happen to be about crime and its solution. The sensation of excited discovery is a rare pleasure, its pleasure intensified, perhaps, by its very rarity. Get ready, then, because that moment is at hand. *Dirty Laundry* (Bantam, $2.25) by New York *Daily News* columnist Pete Hamill is the first in a planned series about a tough former newspaper columnist who is forced to deal with crime and criminals on a more personal basis than he did as a journalist. Sam Briscoe, obviously based largely on Hamill himself, is also a fictional character. Just as Ross Macdonald's Lew Archer is a fantasy projection of the author, Briscoe's adventures are what Hamill calls "imaginary autobiography." If you have enjoyed Chandler or Macdonald, or wished that Sam Spade or Travis McGee lived amid the frightening excitement of New York, read this book. The series is destined to rank among the classics.

MAITRE D'TECTIVE: To celebrate the Golden Anniversary of the first appearance of Ellery Queen in *The Roman Hat Mystery,* Murder Ink bookstore will feature an evening with Frederic Dannay (the surviving half of the Ellery Queen collaboration) for its second murderous meal in two years. The first such feast, honoring Rex Stout, was held at The Lotos Club (5 East 66th Street, New York), which will again be the scene of the dine.

The epicurean event is planned for January 26, 1979, with a fixed price of $50 per person (what else for a 50th anniversary?), which includes dinner (no one will have to eat a hat, Roman or otherwise), wine, taxes and gratuities. For reservations or further information (send a SASE for a reply) write: Carol Brener, Murder Ink, 271 West 87th St., New York, N.Y. 10023.

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ARISTOCRATIC DETECTIVE: C. W. Scott-Giles, a heraldry expert, exchanged a long series of letters with Dorothy L. Sayers in which the two correspondents attempted to trace the ancestry of Lord Peter Wimsey. The result is the slim, handsomely produced *The Wimsey Family* (Harper & Row, $6.95), which is certain to delight all who hold dear the personality of the famous detective. Livelier than one might have expected, it is the first significant new work about Wimsey since the magnificent volume of the complete short adventures compiled and edited by James Sandoe in 1972, *Lord Peter* (Harper & Row, $10.00).

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

Murder on stage is an infrequent Broadway happening these recent seasons; joyously, there are three killings alone in the first scene of the new Sherlock Holmes play, *The Crucifer of Blood,* and more follow. *Crucifer* is a rousing melodrama somewhat inspired by *The Sign of Four* (although it moves in its own very startling direction), which begins at the Fort of a Thousand Gates at Agra, India, during the Great Mutiny and then takes us to Baker Street, Pondicherry Lodge, a Limehouse opium den and finally—as visually satisfying as any stage spectacular could be—an actual chase by police launch of one-legged Jonathan Small's ship across the foggy waters of the River Thames. Lightning flashes, menacing shadows, secret panels, and hidden treasure add to the wonderfully old-fashioned theatrical thrills. *Crucifer* (the title refers to a drawn-blood oath and its consequences) was first conceived for a Buffalo, N.Y., regional theater by its author-director, Paul Giovanni, because he was dissatisfied with some plays offered him to stage—so he wrote his own. (His first.) Its enthusiastic reception there has led to the current presentation on Broadway by the same production team responsible for last year's successful revival of *Dracula* (and coincidentally at the same New York theater where Bela Lugosi's original stage *Dracula* premiered fifty-one years ago). The play has much to say about the undercurrents of the Victorian order; dark despairs (Giovanni tells EQMN) at which Conan Doyle only hinted but upon which the playwright elaborates. *Crucifer of Blood* is engrossing and eye-filling mystery theater.

You can feast happily upon *Who Is Killing the Great Chefs of*

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rope?, the Nan and Ivan Lyons stery novel refashioned by eenwriter Peter Stone into a ectable thriller in which some the world's great cooks are ed in the style of their culi- y specialties—baked, boiled, pressed—and with Jacque- e Bisset as a renowned stry chef (creator of *Le Bombe helieu*) the final target. As dies keep turning up in the chens of the world's great r-star restaurants, heathen t-foods-franchiser George Se- ultimately unravels the mys-. If murder is your meat, *efs* is lipsmacking.

Another sophisticated mystery nedy has would-be children's ter Jeff Bridges fall haplessly, ocently in love with another n's wife (Farrah Fawcett-Ma- s); to straighten out his ro- ntic problems, it appears that *nebody Killed Her Husband*— now the two must find the l killer before they find them- ves accused of murder. This is iptwriter Reginald Rose's ightly first attempt at a light- rted thriller (he wrote *Twelve gry Men* and *The Defenders* series) and it's good fun with eral interesting murders along way.

John Willard's 1922 stage play, e *Cat and the Canary*, the mate old-dark-house thriller, was filmed first as a 1927 silent by the great European director Paul Leni, filled with Germanic shadows. Bob Hope and Paulette Goddard mixed fright with comedy in the seldom-seen 1939 Paramount remake. Now producer Richard Gordon has prepared a new version, "updating" the plot to the thirties and transferring the American setting to an English manor house (where it was filmed), yet remaining remarkably faithful to the mood of the old play, a leisurely combination of chills and charm. Gordon tells EQMN he had long wanted to film the Willard play, which though a "classic" was amiable and unfamiliar enough that audiences would not react against another remake. He is true to all the play's ingredients: once more the heirs gather for the reading of an eccentric millionaire's will (among the hopeful beneficiaries are Carol Lynley, Honor Blackman, Daniel Massey, and Peter McEnery), the heroine's sanity is questioned and sorely taxed as an escaped lunatic prowls the darkness outside and people disappear behind sliding panels inside. No dark despairs here, just the welcome return of high melodramatic entertainment. *The Cat and the Canary* is still negotiating American distribution.

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tor's Note: A paperback edition of *The Cat and the Canary* has just n released by Dale Books, 380 Lexington Avenue, N.Y., N.Y. 10017, 1.95.

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INTERVIEW: ELLERY QUEEN

This year—1979—marks one of the true golden moments in the history of detective fiction: the 50th anniversary of the publication of the first Ellery Queen novel, *The Roman Hat Mystery*. With its appearance came the creation who is still the most famous American detective in literature. As is now well known, two Brooklyn-born cousins, Frederic Dannay and Manfred B. Lee, collaborated under the pseudonym Ellery Queen and, in a masterstroke, gave their leading character the same name—that perfect combination of syllables which stays magically in the mind once seen or heard. During the more than three years in which these short interviews have been a regular feature of *EQMM*, Frederic Dannay has modestly declined to appear on this page (Manfred B. Lee died in 1971). Finally, conceding the landmark of his Golden Anniversary in print, Mr. Dannay has consented to this interview which will be concluded in the next issue of *EQMM*.

EQMM: You have said that the Ellery Queen character was heavily influenced by S.S. Van Dine and Philo Vance, but it's clear that Queen changed a great deal during his long career.

QUEEN: I think we were influenced by both Van Dine and Philo Vance for the first two or three books. I think we began to get away from them slowly after the first book and maybe after the third book any influence of Van was small. I am not surprised th people comment on this influen because two young writers 1928 (when we were 23 yea old) who had never been traine for example, in the pulps, start to write a book cold, with no pr vious conditioning. It was tl most natural thing in the wor to emulate a successful write and a successful detective cha acter.

What we soon realized w that we somehow had to find o own voice and find our own cha acters. And that is why Ellery h changed not once but many tim as we grew older. The older ar presumably, the more mature v got, the more of ourselves cre into the characterizations. It is tl most natural thing in the wor and I am sure it happens to writers. In the end, the charact of Ellery and the character of h father were so different from tl beginning that it was hard to thi that the same writers wrote tl books.

EQMM: Towards the end, the would you say that the Elle Queen character was a composi of yourself and Manny Lee?

QUEEN: It was inevitable. Yo try to keep yourself out and to certain degree you succeed order to be objective. But yo can't help but build at least part on your own character. I've a ways felt, for example, that th hard-boiled detectives and p

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ate eyes are a kind of dream ersion of the authors themselves. hat is partly proved by the fact and I don't know that many peo- le realize this) that the private ye is just as stylized a character s, for instance, the Great Detec- ive, so-called, of the Golden Age. he private eye may be even more tylized because if a writer tries o do a private-eye story and it sn't his natural bent to write de- ective stories of that type, it nearly always comes out as a parody, and the very fact that it comes out as a parody proves that the formula and the stylization are there to begin with. So, getting back to Ellery, I think that, in the beginning, a main character tends to be an idealized version of what you would like to be, and then, as you get older and more mature, you are willing to put in the warts and failings and foibles in order to be closer to realism.

THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

What mystery writer has cre- ated more series characters than any other? I suspect three con- enders for this record would be Hudson Philips (a.k.a. Hugh Pen- ecost), John Creasey (under his own name and various pseudo- nyms), and Erle Stanley Gardner. Also in the race would be *EQMM*'s own Edward D. Hoch, chronicler of more than a dozen series detectives and criminals, among them western sleuth Ben Snow, private eye Al Darlan, "computer cops" Carl Crader and Earl Jazine, CIA man Harry Ponder, Father David Noone, Interpol's Sebastian Blue, Paul Tower (the *Lollipop Cop*), confi- dence man Ulysses S. Byrd, and others readers of this magazine can readily name.

Readers will inevitably dis- agree as to which Hoch series is the best. Some of us long-time fans owe our allegiance to Satan- hunting Simon Ark. Cipher ex- pert Rand and Captain Leopold surely have their partisans, and relative newcomer Dr. Sam Haw- thorne is making inroads. The probable consensus choice, how- ever, would be crime fiction's leading contemporary thief.

****Edward D. Hoch: *The Thefts of Nick Velvet*, Mysterious Press, P.O. Box 334, East Station, Yonkers, N.Y. 10704, $10.00. The first collection solely devoted to Nick Velvet stories repeats only two tales from *The Spy and the Thief* (Davis, 1971), in which Velvet shared the stage with Rand. Of the thirteen stories in- cluded here, all but two have ap- peared in *EQMM*. "The Theft of the Silver Lake Serpent" here makes its U.S. debut. Hoch con- tributes an informative new in- troduction about the origins of his famous character. Also in- cluded is a bibliography of Vel-

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vet's 33 adventures published as of August 1978. All the stories exhibit Hoch's mastery of detective-story construction. My own favorite is that fine baseball yarn, "The Theft of the Meager Beavers."

****Francis M. Nevins, Jr.: *Corrupt and Ensnare,* Putnam, $8.95. The second novel about law professor-sleuth Loren Mensing is a strong performance in all areas. Though the plot is an elaborate, ornate edifice from another (better?) age of mystery architecture, the fixtures and amenities are all strictly contemporary. Along with the puzzle-making come plenty of cliff-hanger action and a climactic chase that make the dedication to serial director William Witney quite appropriate.

****Frank Branston: *Sergeant Ritchie's Conscience,* St. Martin's, $8.95. A humane but very unsentimental English police procedural, concerning the search for the killer of a young policeman only a few weeks on the job. This second novel has a freshness and vitality that make the familiar procedural elements all seem new. (The protagonist is named Jack Ritchie. Not the same one, I trust.)

***Robert B. Parker: *The Judas Goat,* Houghton Mifflin, $7.95. Private-eye Spenser stalks right-wing terrorists in London, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, and Montreal at Olympics time. Parker does a brisk, neat, fast-moving travelogue of violence, but his plot moves in an absolutely straight line, not a twist in Parker is entertaining and rea able, but on the basis of this bo and the Edgar-winning *Promis Land* (1976), his growing repu tion as a major figure baffles m

***William Diehl: *Sharky's M chine,* Delacorte, $8.95. Tl grand-scale thriller of gangste and cops and spies, war a politics and sex, takes its ti getting in gear but establishes firm hold on the reader when does. Connoisseurs of creati scatology will love Diehl's vic squad dialogue.

***Andrew Garve: *Counterstro* Crowell, $8.95. An enthralli straightforward suspense st with the sure-fire subject of personation. Actor Bob Far is a likeable and untheatrica down-to-earth hero.

***Lawrence Block: *The Burg in the Closet,* Random Hou $6.95. Burglary, dentistry, a detection share the stage in second comic suspense no about Bernie Rhodenbarr, bu lar by trade and sleuth by nec sity. This is a nice job, w genuine clues among jokes.

***Peter Hill: *The Fanat* Scribners, $7.95. This novel political terrorism and hosta holding in a London flat is bottom a religious novel, thou the publisher's blurb does advertise the fact. In any ev it's brief, low-key, very involvi and suspenseful, while conv ing a definite political and re ious viewpoint.

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REVIEWS OF NEW BOOKS

WAIT FOR WHAT WILL COME, by Barbara Michaels, Dodd, Mead, $8.95.

A sprawling granite manor house on the stark cliffs of Cornwall and a family mystery unsolved for two hundred years are the unlooked for inheritance of a pretty, level-headed young American schoolteacher in Barbara Michaels' newest novel of romantic suspense. Terror mounts for the teacher as an ancient prophecy that promises her to a demon lover from the sea seems destined to come true.

". . . Shivery, exciting, and escapist . . . [Barbara Michaels] manages to achieve a nice spoofing tongue-in-cheek tone that makes her romantic damsel-in-distress Gothics or mysteries highly entertaining fare. This is no exception."—*Publishers Weekly*

THE PRO-AM MURDERS, by Patrick Cake, The Proteus Press, $8.95.

NEW!!!! PHOTO-FICTION!!

"Patrick Cake makes a plot move as fast as any writer working today . . . His hero, Dion Quince, is different and appealing. . . . Both Cake and Quince have bright futures. . . ."—*Collin Wilcox*

"(The photos are) a fresh idea."—*Brian Garfield*

". . . a sophisticated but pleasantly quirky hero . . . an easy blend of fast-paced action, humor, and eroticism . . . (with) the additional virtues of crisp writing, clever dialogue, nostalgia, and the famous Bing Crosby Pro-Am Golf Tournament in Pebble Beach . . . exciting and entertaining all the way."—*Bill Pronzini*

". . . a real page-turner with some very interesting surprises . . ."—*John Ball*

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Aiken, Joan	THE SMILE OF THE STRANGER	Doubleday	$8.95	$6.95
Angus, Sylvia	DEAD TO RITES	Crown	7.95	6.35
Crumley, James	THE LAST GOOD KISS	Random House	8.95	6.95
Fraser, Antonia	THE WILD ISLAND	Norton	8.95	6.95
Freeling, Nicolas	THE NIGHT LORDS	Pantheon	7.95	6.35
Gage, Edwin	PHOENIX NO MORE	Harper & Row	8.95	6.95
King, Graham	KILLTEST	St. Martin's	7.95	6.35
MacLeod, Charlotte	REST YOU MERRY	Doubleday	7.95	6.35
Markstein, George	CHANCE AWAKENING	Ballantine	7.95	6.35
Marsh, Ngaio	GRAVE MISTAKE	Little, Brown & Co.	8.95	6.95
Meyers, Manny	THE LAST MYSTERY OF EDGAR ALLAN POE	Lippincott	8.95	6.95
Michaels, Barbara	WAIT FOR WHAT WILL COME	Dodd, Mead	8.95	6.95
Murphy, Tom	ASPEN INCIDENT	St. Martin's	8.95	6.95
Simenon, Georges	MAIGRET'S PIPE	Harcourt Brace Jovanovich	8.95	6.95
Snyder, Zilpha Keatley	HEIRS OF DARKNESS	Atheneum	8.95	6.95
Solomon, Brad	THE OPEN SHADOW	Summit Books	10.00	8.00
Williams, David	TREASURE UP IN SMOKE	St. Martin's	7.95	6.35
Wolk, George	400 BRATTLE STREET	Wyden	8.95	6.95

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an "unusual" story by

GERALD KERSH

Gerald Kersh's "Crooked Bone" first appeared in the August 10, 1968 issue of "The Saturday Evening Post." The editors of the SEP introduced the story as follows: "The Raton Indians have a system of diplomatic immunity, and are said to issue a carved bone, the lucky possessor of which may pass unharmed through the most dangerous forests . . . but woe betide the foolhardy fellow who carries another man's passport!"

One of the most unusual prison and prison-escape stories ever written . . .

CROOKED BONE

by GERALD KERSH

The old commandant had his failings, and was apt to be irritable every so often, when he had to drink a bottle or two of rum in case of fever, but he was a likable man in some ways. "What can't be cured must be endured," he would say. He was a great joker—he would always make the new arrivals welcome with "Greetings, my friends, and distinguished salutations! I am the humble servant of the Government. You are the Government's guests, so consider me as yours to command. My house is yours; make yourselves at home. Feel free to come and go as you please.

"To students of topography and natural history our countryside is fraught with interest. The curious mountain shaped like a three-pronged tooth, which you will observe if you give yourselves the trouble of half turning your heads to the left, is, as the wisps of vapor at the summit will inform you, a volcano. It is called Cerberus, after—as I am sure it is redundant to state—the three-headed dog that guarded the entrance to the pagans' hell. Down here it is hot—up there it is hotter, without benefit of the constant humidity with which we are blessed. Dry as death! Be-

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yond, jungle. Upon the slopes of Cerberus some of you will amuse yourselves studying geology, collecting interesting specimens of pumice stone and sulfur. In basketfuls.

"Behind you, gentlemen"—he put on the voice of a tourist's guide, and every head turned to where he pointed—"behind you, a curiosity of nature which I beg you to consider yourselves welcome to examine at your own risk: the Raton Swamp, a salt quicksand alleged to be bottomless, leading to Sharkskin Reef, all coral and a mile wide . . ." Remember that I heard this speech four times a year for more than twenty years, and could repeat it in my sleep. "After the reef, the surf. After the surf, five hundred miles of deep sea between the reef and the islands. Some of us may improve our knowledge of chemistry panning salt at the edge of the swamp. Thirsty work; but the air is so full of moisture that one scarcely needs to pause to drink. Between sulfur and saline, and a low diet, a veritable health resort, a spa, bless my soul! Rich invalids pay cash for less.

"Now, the good God Himself," he would go on, "can't please everybody, and there will be some restless spirits among you that might grow weary of the pleasures we have to offer, and feel homesick for the great outside world. Well, my friends, the only way out of our little settlement is the same as the way in—over the river Raton, which you have just crossed in a barge. It is shallow, and I do not insult the guests of the Government by setting guards there. But I recommend anybody who has a regard for his health not to try it. Have the kindness, gentlemen, to follow me . . ."

The guards herd the prisoners to the riverbank, and the commandant says, "In the first place, this piece of water is alive with that species of crocodile called the cayman. The cayman is a virtuous reptile—he is perpetually hungry, and yet never loses faith in man nor gives up hope, and is always vigilant. Worse than the cayman is the ratfish. We are rather proud of our ratfish. He is related to the shark and ray . . . Ahoy, there! Bring the goat!"

Two guards drag up a goat. They pick it up by the feet. "In with it," says the commandant, and they heave the goat out into the stream. The poor creature tries to come back, but all of a sudden the water seems to boil. The goat screams and raises first one leg and then another; and everybody can see that these legs are skeleton legs now, stripped white. It falls, struggles up again. Half the flesh is gone from its head. And now a rotten log comes

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to life and splits in two halves full of green teeth. There is a snap, and the water is quiet. A million flies come down over the bloodstains, and that is that.

The commandant concludes, "Zoologically interesting, no more. But of ethnological interest are the Raton Indians, who live in the jungle beyond. Consider how difficult it must be to get a livelihood in that jungle, where even the gristly flesh of poor convicts is esteemed as a delicacy! They are clever at making masks out of human skin. They like white men because they have beards—to skin and mount, as well as to eat; I mean—and have found that the human head peels better when the victim is still alive. But if the Indians don't flay and devour the lost traveler in these parts, the *tigres* will; and if he has the phenomenal good luck to escape both of these, he won't in any circumstances escape the snakes, leeches, and insects.

"So go cheerfully to your allotted tasks, be grateful to the Government for having abolished capital punishment and given you a chance to rehabilitate yourselves, and be thankful for your lot. As you will find out, this place is run on humane modern military lines, as they call them: no flogging for insubordination or idleness—only Field Punishment Number One, or Two, or Three, and so on.

"In Number One they just tie your hands behind your back and trice you up so that you are standing on tiptoe hanging from a beam, and you are left without water for twenty-four hours. No bloodshed, except what the flies draw.

"Number Two is simply burnishing a big sheet of rusty corrugated iron. You're on half rations until it shines like a mirror; only, the climate being what it is, the metal begins to rust in two hours, so that the job is impossible—like Number Three, which is to dig a dry trench four feet deep. Since you strike water three feet down, it can't be done. After a week or two, sentence is not canceled out but suspended, renewable at the sergeant's discretion.

"Number Four is solitary confinement in an underground cell that keeps filling up with water; if you don't want to drown, you pump, day and night, twenty minutes in every hour.

"So I warn you to take things as they come, live from day to day, be philosophical, and just let time pass. Remember that you're here to have your spirit broken—but don't let it happen. . . . Carry on, Sergeant, march the scum away."

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I took it hard at first, working on the jungle road. That was twenty years ago; we cut the undergrowth from dawn to dark, but almost as fast as we cut it, it grew back. And we are still chopping that same brush, and still there is no road, and not likely ever to be, the thought of which drives some men mad.

It is the same with the pumice quarrying; we have cut and powdered mountains of the stuff, which, there being no road to carry it out by, the rains simply wash away.

You must not take it to heart, but learn to laugh at it. Just be calm. As for the guards, they are to be pitied rather than hated. Consider: for you this is purgatory, and wherever you are sent, dead or alive, after this will be paradise compared to it; but *they* are here of their own free choice, and this is the best they could do for themselves!

I have been luckier than most. A long time ago I happened to notice that certain grasses growing on the edges of the swamp are good for weaving. This having been my trade, I picked some, and prepared them, and passed spare time making myself a hat—such a hat as only a man in love or a man in prison would think of taking the trouble to make for himself.

It caught the old commandant's eye and he asked me, "How long did it take you to make that?"

"A half hour here, a half hour there—altogether a month, your excellency."

"How long would it take you, working full time at it?"

"A day and a half, two days, your excellency."

"How long are you here for?"

"Life, your excellency."

"Then you have all the time in the world at your disposal, you lucky man. What duty are you on?"

"The road, your excellency."

"Sergeant," he said, "take this fellow off the road and let him make hats."

So it was my good luck that I was allowed to build a hut of my own for a workshop and make a lamp so that I could work after sundown. I wove five hats a week, and also some little grass dolls, which the commandant sold to a trader. I think he got a good price for them, for although he was not bound to give me anything, he made a practice of throwing me a few small coins for tobacco money from time to time, most of which the sergeant took away from me. But I still managed to hide away a copper here

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and a copper there—it all mounts up.

In twenty years I got together over $30, which I hid in a hole in the ground, along with certain other treasures which I will tell you about presently. I might have done a lot worse. For instance, I set lines for the big white mudfish that live under the banks and make very good eating, for all they are not very pretty to look at; and sometimes I swapped a fresh fish for some dried vegetables, so that I was seldom without something tasty for my evening meal. I could have trapped birds, if there had been any to trap; but they avoided our settlement, for there was nothing for them to peck up. What is more, I was never without company.

There is no companionship on a gang. Every man is alone, wrapped up in himself, swinging the machete or heaving the dusty shovel or dragging the salt rake, too miserable to care. But, so that I could give all my time to weaving, I was always provided with some sort of assistant to cut, wash, dry, and sort the straw, and cut the little wooden pegs the dolls are woven around.

Every man has his story, and out here, after a time, people find in their memories things they never knew were stored away there. Over the years I have had many assistants, some of them—like forgers, unfortunate politicians, perverted schoolteachers, and so forth—well-educated men. I learned a lot from them.

I came here ignorant as dirt, but now I could feel comfortable in any company—not as a talker, but as a listener. Cultivate this habit; it will see you everything.

With stillness and patience you can sleep unharmed among snakes and *tigres*; even the guards won't bother you; the Indians themselves will learn not to distrust you. And believe me, the Ratons are a very queer race of people, the shyest savages in the world. Even twenty years ago they only very rarely let themselves be seen; now it may be years before you catch a glimpse of one.

They are little and quick, and ever so quiet, and they live where the jungle is thickest; they paint themselves gray and green and yellow in spots and stripes, to blend with the leaves, so that they can make themselves more invisible than a stick insect, and can simply disappear—melt away—even as you look at them.

They make their tools and weapons out of quartz and other hard rock from the volcano, and I have seen a Raton knife chipped out of rock crystal that was sharper than any razor. But

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of course iron is better, and so we used to trade with them, in the old commandant's day.

We would leave an ax or a machete on the opposite bank of the river, and go away. Soon, out of nowhere, there would appear beside it a heap of fruit and nuts, the carcass of a wild pig or an antelope. Try as you might, you could never see them leaving the stuff. You would watch and watch, and see nothing. Then, getting tired, you would turn your head, or close your eyes to yawn—and there were their trade goods. If you were satisfied, you took them away, and later they would take the machete or the ax. If not, you waited, and they added to the pile until the trade was complete.

The stuff they brought was for the officers and the guards, of course. The old commandant dealt quite fairly with the Indians—almost generously, I may say—and did his best to get on friendly terms with them. He was, in his way, a very intelligent man, and his patience was remarkable. He had picked up rumors of gold in these parts and hoped that if there were gold the Raton might lead him to it. I was told that it took him five long years to get on speaking terms with one of them, moving slower than the hour hand of a clock, a hundredth of a hair's-breadth at a time, and a present every inch of the way!

But there was no gold; only roots and berries and some spices and a little fresh meat. All he got worth selling was a few finely made stone spear- and axheads, for the museums; not even some of their dried heads, which nothing in this world would induce them to part with. So the commandant lost interest and trade fell off.

But the Raton liked our machetes and took to creeping into the settlement to steal them. They had no boats, and nobody knew how they crossed the river, which nobody would dare dip so much as a finger into for fear of the ratfish and the caymans. It was said that they had magic powers; a story that gathered strength as time went on, since even the sharpest-witted guard could never manage to see or hear them, but only smell them.

"This calls for two remedies," says the commandant, "an extra-strong lock on the storeroom and a pair of nice fierce Cacofuego mastiffs."

A Cacofuego mastiff, as you know, is brave enough and fast enough to stand off a charging panther. Two of these fine dogs were brought from Gaudeama at considerable expense. Their

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offspring guard the storeroom to this day, and very dangerous beasts they are. They have pinned more than one prisoner, after dark, but have never yet caught an Indian. None dared to come here after they arrived.

The guards almost captured one Raton, though, only a week before the dogs were brought in. He had got entangled in some baling wire, and a corporal managed to catch him by the ankle; but he kicked loose and ran. Half a dozen guns went off, and the air was thicker with buckshot than prisoners' soup is with peas, as the saying goes. They had him hemmed in, but he doubled back.

I was working late by the light of a wick floating in fat when he came in, dazed for an instant even by that tiny light. With my thumb over my shoulder I made a gesture toward a heap of newly sorted straw, and he was under it like a snake, just as the corporal came in and said, "I just caught a Raton—I had him by the foot but he slipped away like a fish"—sniffing his hand and spitting—"have you seen a Raton?" I shook my head. "Bah! What kind of stinking grease do they smear themselves with?"

I said, stupidly, "Perhaps it makes them invisible."

He went away, and when things were quiet I gave the straw a poke with my foot, blew out the light, and said, "On your way, Indio."

He was the little Indian our commandant had made friends with, and he spoke our language. He said, "You help Pelototec, Pelototec help you. This bad place. You want go away, I take you. Over river. You come."

I said, "Oh, yes, and be eaten up by the caymans and the ratfish and the Ratons. No, thank you."

"You take this," he said, and gave me a carved knucklebone on a thong. "You Pelototec brother, you take this. If Pelototec dead, his sons know. If his sons dead, his sons' sons know, and no hurt, you take this and keep."

It was his identity, his private seal, as you might say, and it marked the bearer of it as one with him.

Then he took from round his neck another thong, tied about a fish bladder filled with some waxy-feeling stuff. This, he told me, was Raton medicine against all the things that live in the river.

"This make you brother to cayman, so cayman no eat you." Cayman doesn't eat cayman, and the ratfish leave the armor-plated cayman alone; they know its smell and don't break their teeth on it.

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What the Raton did was very simple, and not magic at all: they cut the musk sac out of the bull cayman, mixed it with rancid cayman fat and other things, and made of it an ointment with which they rubbed themselves before entering the water. And the longer it was kept in its bag, he said, the stronger the medicine got.

"You come," he said; and all of a sudden he was gone, as quietly as a puff of smoke, leaving behind him nothing but the Raton Indian smell which, now that I came to think of it, was nothing but the stink of crocodiles.

I put the bag and the bone in the same tin box with my money, which I had hidden in a hole. I had been here only ten years at that time, and had $12. But my heart beat high, because now I could see my way clear to getting away. Twelve dollars was not enough, though; I needed twenty-five or thirty to get over the border into Contrabono.

But with patience this could be scraped together.

Of patience, thank God, I always had my full share. Patience and a quiet mind. "Pacifico," my companions would say, calling me by my nickname, "how the devil does a fellow like you come to be here? Were you framed?"

And I would always answer, truthfully, "No, I was not framed. I am here for life, for robbery and murder."

"How much was it for, Pacifico?"

"A roll of American money as thick as my wrist."

"Did you have yourself a good time, at least, before they caught you?"

"I had the money in my hand for thirty seconds."

"Poor old Pacifico," my fellow prisoner might say. "You're the sort of mug that goes on the job blind, without making a plan, and gets picked up first time out."

"Thank God, that sort of mug."

"Hunger drove you to it, I suppose?"

"A kind of hunger."

Then I would shut my mouth, because my shameful little story has never seemed to me to be fit to tell. Sometimes I have envied great sinners, and would even have been grateful for that knack some felons have of painting themselves, quite realistically, redder than hellfire and blacker than night.

What might they not make of a story like mine, if they had it

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to tell, but which I couldn't draw out longer than ten minutes, if I chose to talk of it! I come from Ysor in the Zamaya region. I was not ugly and not handsome; a little better off than most in that I had my skill in my craft, as well as my bit of land. Some men envied me because I was married to a good and very beautiful girl, Dolores, who loved me, and by whom I already had two sons. Was I happy? I was at peace—a little better off than I am now.

It takes a man with the spirit of man that goes upward to be happy. Mine was the spirit of the beast that goes downward into the earth and knows neither joy nor sorrow, but only the difference between comfort and discomfort. Then my wife's cousin came to Ysor—Teresa Rojas, a widow from Riego—and she was everything that Dolores was not.

Where Dolores was fair and soft as a flower, Teresa was dark and tough as an old saddle; where Dolores was deep and round, Teresa was square and flat. Dolores was clean in her person and sweetened any place she set foot in, while Teresa was a slut who carried with her a musky stink as of wild beasts. Dolores was a happy wife and a loving mother, whereas Teresa was insatiable and loveless and barren.

Therefore, when Teresa dug her dirty nails into my neck, made hooks of her hipbones and a cup of her belly, blew her tiger's breath into my face and said, "The Americans are going after oil around Gaudeama. Money will flow like water. A man like you, with golden hands, can make a fortune there. Leave that flabby madonna and come to Gaudeama with me, and let's have fun," did I answer, "What kind of a crazy man do you take me for, that you ask me to leave the likes of Dolores and bed down with a polecat?" No, I left everything to go away with Teresa, and bolts and bars could not have held me!

She was as raw, rank, and suffocating as your first mouthful of rum or tobacco, but God help you once you had got the taste for her!

Alas for my "golden hands"—my little skills—who wanted them in Gaudeama? Such strength as she left me I spent on the splintery derricks, giving her all I earned. She was not even faithful to me, and this, in a way, was a relief to me; I had begun to believe that I must have gone mad, to run off after a creature like this. She wanted money, always money—what was I to do, I asked her—coin money, print money?

"What use are you to me? Other women have pretty things."

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"I give you all I have."

"All you have, all you have! What's the use of all *you* have? Other men walk about with silver buttons on their vests, and their girls in silks and satins."

"What do you want me to do? Go out and knock somebody down for his silver buttons?"

"It would take a man to do that. Don't touch me. Go away. When I think of all I have sacrificed for you, you nobody! Go home, go home to Ysor and weave hats!"

Meanwhile she had more than her share of pretty things, which on her became ugly things; for she attracted the lowest sort of men, and what she asked for she got. I was eaten up with jealousy, but she said, "If you don't like it, get out. I'm sick of the sight of your sheep's face. Or take your knife and fight for me like a man." She loved violence; it excited her.

"I am no more and no less a coward than the next man," I said, "but I have no fight left in me. You have sucked my blood."

"You are a sheep. Go back, for God's sake, to Dolores!"

"I cannot. I am empty."

"You are a fool, without spirit."

"I am sick to the heart."

I had fallen very low and had already taken to drinking; it was not far, now, to the bottom. Soon I would become a murderer and a thief, and then a convict—which brings me to what happened one night at Perico's.

Gaudeama is a rotten place—loose ends and castoff bits of swamp, rock, and jungle, a kind of rubbish heap of creation—but the prospect of oil had drawn all sorts of people there and Perico did a roaring trade in his café.

It was a long, low building with a corrugated-iron roof, a room lit by hurricane lamps and furnished with chairs and tables and two dance floors, one of wood for customers wearing shoes and the other of trodden earth for those who came barefoot. A notice at the entrance, which most people could not read, and those who could read ignored, requested clients to leave firearms with the attendant. There was a band, too—of instruments made of burros' jawbones full of loose teeth, hollow logs, gravel in empty gourds, pigs' bladders attached to whistling twigs, dried gut stretched on cane frames that made such music as may not be heard anywhere else this side of hell—to which everybody danced.

I had been drinking a cheap cactus liquor that turns cloudy

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when you mix it with water, but then a German with a month's pay in his pocket had come to our table and, civilly begging permission to sit with us, bought fizzy sweet wine for Teresa, and strong black beer for himself and me.

She was all smiles. I knew what was going to happen, but did not much care. He asked my leave to dance with her. I shrugged and said, "With my leave or without it, if she wants to dance she'll dance." They added their shadows to the shadows on the walls, and I felt in all my pockets, knowing that my money was spent; nothing was there but my knife and three copper coins.

But just in front of me several Americans in whole suits of clothes, businessmen amusing themselves seeing the low life of Gaudeama, were throwing money about in handfuls. As I looked, their leader—a great, broad man with a tremendous voice—having just paid for wine with a banknote and told the waiter to keep the change, carelessly pushed his wallet into his hip pocket; a corner of it stuck out. He wore loose clothes, but the fatness of that wallet stretched his trousers tight. I stared at it. I could not take my eyes off it. All I had to do was reach out and take it and run.

There was enough in that wallet to keep Teresa happy for a long time. My fingers itched, but stayed on the wet table top. If I had just one more drink, I thought, I'd pluck up courage. But I did not have the price of that drink, and it occurred to me that it wasn't courage I wanted, but the will to steal. I was a poor man, but well brought up, and there were two things of which I had always thought myself incapable—begging and thieving.

Oh, damned Teresa! I felt the sweat coming out on my face. To hell with her, I said to myself, I'll go home to Dolores, that woman without stain, and ask forgiveness! I'll go now! But still I stared at that man's swollen hip pocket, thinking that, after all, one of the first saints to sup with Jesus in paradise was a repentant thief.

Then all of a sudden there came out of the cigarette smoke a little, undistinguished man in khaki trousers who, passing in front of me and moving smoothly as a fish, dipped two fingers into the big American's pocket, removed the wallet very swiftly and gracefully, and was gone in an instant. And in the same instant I assured myself that to steal is one thing, but to take loot from a thief is something else again.

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Before the thought had even properly formed itself I was out of my chair and slipping through the crowd, making for the door. I caught one glimpse of Teresa, dancing, clinging to the German somewhat as a weasel clings to a rabbit, her mouth just under the ear; and I little knew that this was to be the last time I should ever see her.

Money she wanted? Money she would have!

I saw the thief dodging into the bush, keeping to the black shadows cast by the staring moon, and I smiled. There is no jungle so deep that a Zamaya man can't make his way through it, by day or by night.

My foot touched something hard—an end of rusty iron pipe, half as long as my arm. It was with relief that I picked it up in mid-stride, for I did not want to lay my bare hands on him, and hated the thought of using my knife in the dark. I did not mean to kill him.

From time to time he looked back, but he did not see me. Shortening the distance between us little by little, I crept up on him. Now he felt that he was safe, and stopped to light a cigarette. What kind of sneak thief was this, I wondered, and where did he think he was going?

Most of them dived into the rats' nest of the shantytown that was Gaudeama and took cover in a bank of blank faces all like their own. This one, all alone, was on the path that led to the Gaudeama River ford. The drink was dying out inside me and I felt very strange, as in a fever dream. My hands did not belong to me, and the iron pipe seemed light and soft as fur. I came within striking distance at last, after four winding miles, and I was proud of my light-footedness, because he did not know I was there until I said, "Pardon me, friend."

He turned, and even as I struck him down I was pleased to see the blade of his knife in the moonlight—he wasn't unarmed. One blow would have been enough, but as he fell I hit him twice more, backhand and forehand. He lay on his face. Now what I needed was a smoke; but, having no tobacco, I put my hand in his shirt pocket and took his, which he kept in an old medicine tin; I rolled and lit a cigarette, sitting on my heels like an honest man resting between spells of work. Very tired, then, I felt under his shirt, found the wallet, unfolded it, and saw that it was stuffed with money. Now, somehow, it frightened and disgusted me.

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I thought, I'll have another cigarette and then run back to Perico's, find the American, say, "Here is your money, which I took back off the thief who stole it," and hope for an honest man's reward. I didn't hear the footsteps of men approaching. Suddenly a strong light flashed into my face and something sharp pressed into my side—a little bayonet on the end of a carbine—and there stood a sergeant of carabineers and two men.

One of the men turned the body over, and said, "He's dead, Sergeant, this one," and another flashlight came on, so that I could see the face all covered with blood and jungle soil, the eyes and mouth wide open.

The sergeant took the wallet from my hand, looked inside, whistled, and said, "When thieves fall out, honest men come into their own." He cocked his revolver. "Run for it," he said to me; but I kept still.

He looked into the wallet again, found an identity card, and said, "Oh, hell! This is the property of Mr. Tracy Broadribb, the oilman, and had better be returned to him intact, after all."

The man who had turned the body over said, "Sergeant, this is the one we were looking for. This is Little Geronimo."

"No!" the sergeant cried, bending down to look, while the other man tied my hands behind me, lashing my thumbs together with a cord. "Yes, by God, so it is! I thought Little Geronimo was always a loner, though. You," he said to me, "since when have you been his partner?"

I could only say, "I never saw him before in my life." They laughed at that.

A man said, "Sergeant, shall I remove the head for identification purposes?"

"That's the trouble with the likes of you," the sergeant answered. "Science is wasted on you, and you have no idea of progress. Who needs his stinking head for identification? What d'you think the Bureau of Investigation's for? We've got his fingerprints. So simply go through him for papers and whatnot, and then cut off one thumb. After that, roll him into the bush and let the dogs and the buzzards and the ants take care of him."

And to show me that there were no hard feelings, he gave me a drink of rum out of a flask, put a cigarette between my lips, and said, "You'll get life. Cheer up—it can't last forever."

I bowed my head in shame and was silent, then and later, when I was tried and sentenced, and afterward while serving my sen-

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tence. "A kind of hunger," was the only reason I could give for my act.

I told my pitiful story to only one other man, and then in very remarkable circumstances, of which I will tell you.

Alvarado was a person of culture; the kindest of friends, the gayest of companions, and the best helper I'd ever been assigned, although he never spoke of himself without disparagement. "About you, Pacifico," he would say, "there is a sort of thunderstruck sanctification." *Aie,* those beautiful rolling words! "You are a consecrated bullock, a sacrificial goat. You are Balaam's ass—to you is vouchsafed a vision of angels. An honest weaver you were and are, and shall remain, come hell or high water. Now, I am a hustler and a bum by inclination, vocation, and profession."

He had a pleasing laugh and fine white teeth, although he must have been 45 years old, and his red beard was streaked with gray. "I have a crooked bone in me."

I said, "Who has not?"

He said, "Lots of people have not. You have not. A man with a crooked bone would rather eat the worms out of another man's plate than the beans out of his own—he gets more spiritual nourishment out of stolen shucks than honest corn. Why? Because he has a crooked bone."

"Why, Alvarado?"

"Because! I come of a decent family—respectable, honest yet not poor; my father was a lawyer. What made me enjoy a tortilla rolled in a filthy fist in the marketplace and bought with a copper coin stolen from the poor box, rather than a well-cooked meal at table in my father's house? Why? At school I could do my studies without effort. Why, then, did I prefer to clamber up a pipe, break into a room, steal a sheet of questions, and pass an examination that way? Why? The crooked bone.

"I was kicked out of the seminary, asked to leave the university, paid to go away from home and stay away. I could have been a lawyer, a doctor, an accountant, a priest. But before I was twenty-one I was forger, pitchman, abortionist, blackmailer, con man, cardsharp, and pimp. With my gifts I could as easily have sold honest stocks and shares as false stuff, but—the crooked bone, the crooked bone!"

"*Aie, aie, aie,* Alvarado!"

"Yes, *aie, aie, aie,* Alvarado. Naturally, then, I gravitated to pa-

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triotism, philanthropy, the service of my fellow men. I refer, of course, to politics. In politics, as in hell, everything is justifiable, excusable, pardonable, condonable—even laudable. Rob your father and murder your mother, and say, 'I did it for the Cause,' and all's well. I slipped up there: the way to get on, in politics, is to attach yourself to a minority that will soon become a majority—that way you get to be a hero and find yourself in on the ground floor where the real pickings are.

"I attached myself to Carrera of the Progressive Liberals, when he was getting sucker money from abroad. According to my calculation, Carrera was a comer. But Carrera seemed to waver and weaken. He went into hiding, over the border. I sold out to the junta, just as Medina came into power, and I thought I was sitting pretty. But then came the so-called 'July Resurgence,' Carrera's *coup d'état*—he and his men came back out of the cactus like a dust storm—and I was swept away!"

"Poor Alvarado, is that how you lost your arm?" I asked him; for his left arm ended at the elbow.

"No. This"—he touched the stump—"is a misfortune, and yet in a way it is not. Lack of this limb, since I can no longer handle cards or dice to my satisfaction, has made a beggar of me. Yet I don't altogether begrudge the loss of it. Half a pair of arms is better than nothing at all, and I came pretty close to losing arms, legs, and everything—my life, I mean."

"Yes, while there's life, there's hope."

"Oh, nonsense!" says Alvarado. "Sentimental gook! As the wireworm and the scorpion, so is Man. There is no hope, no law but the law of the jungle, and no mercy but the mercy of death. It is all a traveler's story. After that comes nothing, and anything is better than that."

And he rolls a cigarette, wonderfully quick, with one snap of the fingers, and goes on, "It was like this. Carrera was in and I was on the run, wanted 'for questioning.' So I did not wait to pick up some money I had put by, but made my getaway in my shirt and trousers, with only a handful of small change between me and starvation—a badly wanted man, and quite conspicuous because of my red hair.

"Now, as luck would have it, a swindler named Tracy Broadribb was pretending to drill a nonexistent oilfield at Gaudeama, and selling shares in it. Every rascal in the country was there. So to Gaudeama I fled, sure that I could make a stake there, and so es-

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cape to North American by way of Contrabono.

"And sure enough, first time out in a joint called Perico's, what looked like luck came my way: Tracy Broadribb himself, getting drunk with his friends, and with a wallet thick enough to choke an alligator sticking half out of his hip pocket! I said to myself, 'Oh, Geronimo de Alvarado y Guzman, the devil looks after his own indeed!'

"And I took a swift look about me. Certain things one remembers at times like these, and one thing that stuck in my mind was a certain group of people at a table nearby. There was a skinny, dark, flat-breasted woman with a horrible curved smile like a cannibal's necklace of human teeth, sitting between two men, and looking just like one of Goya's witches. The man on her left was good-looking, but haggard and empty; the other was fat and pink and full of blood, and it was him she had her eye on.

"It was something like a bad dream, my friend—but then Broadribb leaned back to laugh at something and his pocket stood open like a satchel. I had the wallet out in an instant, and an instant later was out in the dark and making for the path that led through the brush to the river ford. I was safe, I thought. But then somebody said, 'Pardon me'—said it, not casually, but in a tone of voice as if he really wished to be pardoned for something.

"As I turned, I caught a glimpse of the pale young man out of the Goya group at Perico's, ghastly in that moonlight, and then there was sunlight and stars and pinwheels and comets and firecrackers as he hit me on the head.

"The strange thing was that I didn't become unconscious—I couldn't move a muscle or a nerve, or even blink an eye, but I was wide-awake, as sometimes happens in these circumstances. The pale man took Broadribb's wallet. He helped himself to a pinch of my tobacco and a cigarette paper, but put the tobacco box back in my pocket very punctiliously.

"Then, as he lit a cigarette, out of the bushes came some carabineers. One of them glanced at me and said, 'Sergeant, this is the one we're looking for—this is Little Geronimo.' They took my papers, and when they cut off the top joint of my thumb for positive identification I fainted in real earnest. It wasn't until the ants stung me awake that I came to, naked in the bush, in great pain from my throbbing hand—for my thumb was festering. Which is how I lost my arm.

"But I was on record, now, as being dead, and was free as the

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air. And I stayed at liberty for twenty years after that, and the things I did and the things that happened to me were more terrible and amusing than the Saragossa Manuscript and the Tales of Hoffmann rolled into one. So I suppose I ought to be philosophic about getting caught at last and having to serve ten years in this place; since I have got away with things that would have got me a thousand years in any civilized jail, and a few death sentences into the bargain, and have been living on a sort of borrowed time, after all . . . What the devil's the matter with you? Have you gone mad?"

For I had fallen on my knees, clasped him around the waist, and burst into tears. I cried, "For twenty years I have been praying for forgiveness, and for the repose of your soul, but thank God I didn't kill you after all!" Then I told him my story, as I have told you.

He roared with laughter and said that it was the funniest thing he had ever heard in all his life. "And I see the funny side of things, too," he said. "Oh, what a joke it would be to march me up to the commandant, cut my throat before his eyes, and say, 'This is the man I was sentenced for murdering twenty years ago. I can't be tried twice on the same charge. What now, *hombre?*' Eh?"

"Don't even think of such things," I said.

"It is all like a dream," said Alvarado. "And yet, as I was saying, although I ought to be taking things philosophically at this stage, I tell you—rather than spend ten years in this hellhole I swear I'll slit my throat!"

I said, "I thought you said that anything is better than nothing at all." He was about to make some interesting reply, but I told him, "Be calm, dear Alvarado. I'll get you out of here."

I had for him, now, such an affection as I had never felt in all my life before, a great love.

He said, "There are only two ways out of here—by air in the bellies of the buzzards and by water in the guts of the cayman."

"Not so," I said, and told him of what Pelototec, the Raton Indian, had given me. "I have thirty-two dollars put by," I said. "Be patient a year or so while I get together five more, and we'll make our escape together." This lifted him, at first, into a high heaven of hope, and he embraced me and made me get some rum to celebrate what he called his "return to life."

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You have witnessed the pleasure of a father who sees his son come out of a burning fever and call for food? Such was my pleasure in sharing a good drink with Alvarado and letting him finish the bottle. But then his bright mood clouded over. "Thirty-two dollars! I paid three times that much for a pair of shoes. Five dollars more—oh, my sweet Redeemer!—I used to tip my barber that much! And a year or so, a year or so! You talk easily of a year or so, you burro of a Pacifico; you are a lifer, resigned to this sort of thing, a hardened jailbird, a calloused soul. Can you understand what a year or so in a place like this means to a man like me?" And, "How do you know that the Indian wasn't lying? And even if he wasn't, how do you know his ointment hasn't lost its strength?"

I said, "An hour ago you were ready to jump into the river and chance it. The medicine gets stronger with age. Have faith."

"But how do you know there's enough of the stuff for two men?"

"A little goes a long way."

"Oh, if I only had my two hands and a pair of dice!"

"I can make you a pair of dice, dear Alvarado, but with whom could you play? From whom could you win what?"

"Let me look at this precious Raton medicine of yours," he said.

"All in good time, friend, all in good time."

But then he took to feeling in the thatch of my hut, and in the walls, and I knew what was in his mind. But I persuaded myself that I did not want to know. We belonged to each other!

Then one day Alvarado, who never made a false gesture or a clumsy move in spite of his one arm, knocked over the water jar and said, with a laugh, "I am getting old. My reflexes are going."

I said, "Your reflexes are all there, Alvarado, and you are young for your forty-five years in spite of the life you have led. I know that trick." The tears trickled down my face. "Where the water settles, there's where I dug the hole; after all has soaked in, dig in the last place that stays damp. No?"

I was weighed down with a terrible loneliness. "Alvarado, listen. There's no need to steal from me. I am your friend. Let me tell you something—a man must live by a tale, a traveler's story told in the dark, a long dream. I have no hope of ever getting away from here. Why? Because, to tell you the truth, I don't want to. I've been here twenty-two years, weaving my fingers to the bone, weaving my eyes out, weaving my life away. I'm not the man I thought I was, once upon a time—I'm afraid of the jungle

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that closes in, I'm afraid of spaces that open out, I'm afraid of new faces.

"And do you want to know a secret? When I have a touch of the fever, what wakes me up in a cold sweat is the dream that something drags me through a hole in a wall into bright light on an open road, and somebody says, 'Pacifico, you are free!'

"But I am an old man lost and all alone in a world of children. Imagine that." I was crying now. "Take what is buried there under the floor. It's yours. I knew in my heart that I'd never use it. I only wanted to keep you with me a little longer . . . or rather, I only wanted to keep myself from facing the most horrible fact of all—that I don't want to be at liberty."

And I covered my face.

He grasped my hand then, and said, with a break in his voice, "Pacifico, I'll stay and keep you company."

"Bless your heart for saying so," I said. "Just for a split second you meant it, and for that little moment God will forgive all your sins at last. But even as the words passed your lips the thought was going through your mind, why didn't I knock this fellow on the head like the respectable outlaw that I am, and get him off my mind? Now I'll have to whip up a quarrel with him for my pride's sake, damn his eyes! That's what you said to yourself."

"What puts such a thought into your head, Pacifico?"

"I read you, poor child! Yes, yes, the few dollars and the other stuff are in a hole in the floor where the water has settled. I'll get them out for you—I know the feel of that hole, the way you would know the feel of the doorway to your own home, if you ever had one. Don't work yourself into a rage against me and hate me simply to justify stealing those things from me. I've told you—as far as I'm concerned, it's nothing but a dream. Take them, Alvarado, with my—"

"I know your sort," says Alvarado, through his teeth. "This is a common informer's gimmick, a dirty little lifer's trick to get a bottle of rum and a few sticks of tobacco as a reward for capturing an escaped convict. I run; you give the alarm; they make a public example of me."

"I read you right," I tell him. "You can't accept a gift in good faith. You've *got* to con and pilfer. Still, I might have plucked up courage to come away with you in a year or so—I doubt it, yet I just might have. As matters stand, go with God. The guards won't be making their rounds for another hour and by that time you'll

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be over the river and in the jungle. Don't forget to smear yourself thoroughly—"

"Just as a precautionary measure," says Alvarado, picking up the stick we beat out the straw with.

I saw it coming, but had no time to guard my head.

When I came to, the commandant asked me, "What did he take out of that hole in the floor?"

I replied, "All I had—nothing much."

"There was a strong smell of Indians. Did you see any Indians?"

"No, Commandant."

"He had the luck of the devil—swam right across the river and got over without a scratch. What the Ratons will do to him is something else again." He was an affable, educated kind of man. "Anthropology is a fascinating study."

"Yes, Commandant."

"Even in the lowest types there is something of the divine spark. The Eskimos of the far north, armed only with bone spears, slay whales. The natives of the African jungles converse over huge distances by means of drums. The debased blackfellows of Australia invented the boomerang, the woomera, and a national language. The North American Indians converse in deaf-and-dumb gestures. The Ratons, we are told, have a kind of system of diplomatic immunity and are said to issue *laissez-passers* of carved bone, the lucky possessor of one of which may pass unharmed, even guarded, through the most dangerous forests."

"Indeed, Commandant?"

"But I have never seen one of these bones, and neither, to the best of my knowledge, has anybody else. Yet they are believed to exist; and woe betide the foolhardy fellow who tries to get by carrying another man's passport!" He contemplated me again. "He was your friend and comrade, and he robbed you, eh? You shared your rum with him and he cheated you?"

"No, no, Commandant."

"Your head is confused, I see. Well, no doubt he was working out his destiny. Without a Judas there could have been no Crucifixion."

So five years passed, and whatever money I made I spent, saving nothing. Then somebody discovered that there was a great number of sapodilla trees hereabout. From the sapodilla comes

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chicle, of which chewing gum is made; and huge sums of money are spent every day on this strange stuff.

Nothing stops civilized men when great matters are at issue. Do we need a level? We abolish a mountain. A canal? We stamp out yellow fever. Chicle gum? Out go the Raton Indians from their forests, and with a vengeance. They could pick us off easily, but when they started shooting their poisoned darts at chicle company men, a major of Rangers came in with a punitive expedition.

And that was a great day for the anthropologists, and other men of science, who accompanied the expedition and had their headquarters in some houses we built for them near our own officers' quarters. Carriers came in bearing baskets full of all sorts of primitive curiosities—weapons, idols, paintings, jewelry, and, most important of all, the Raton tribal treasure of dried heads, some of them hundreds of years old and others quite fresh.

There were also some prisoners, both male and female. Raton women are a curiosity, too, their faces being bound tight at birth so that their noses never grow. The idea of this was to make them undesirable to other tribesmen. But such is the nature of man that, before long, this horrible deformity was considered a mark of beauty, and they were doubly sought after.

One day one of our guards came to my hut and said, "The commandant wants to see you. He says there's an old pal of yours there you'll be glad to meet again."

I followed him to the ethnologists' shed, and very strange it looked and smelled, lined now with racks of human heads, masks, and wizards' cloaks, over which some men in glasses were stooping and attaching labels. The commandant was not there, but between two soldiers there squatted on the floor a very old and wizened Raton. Feeble as he was, they had a rope round his waist, of which each soldier kept hold of one end. I knew him at once.

"Pelototec," I said.

"Who say my name?"

"You were in my place long ago," I said. "I hid you under the grass. You gave me some medicine and a little bone."

He said, "No. You say what is not." And he fumbled at a string around his neck and held up that carved knucklebone which I knew so well. As he turned his face toward me, I saw that his eyes were white as milk: he was stone blind.

"You no brother to Pelototec. Pelototec make brother to go free . . . many, many, many sleeps away. Make him brother to Ra-

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ton; one heart, one spirit." He felt the carvings in the knucklebone, smiled faintly, and said, "This me, this my brother."

I lied, he told me—he had been blind many years, but was not easily fooled. He was a chief among his people, and a great doctor. He knew what was what. The man to whom he had given this bone, and the cayman medicine, had been captured in the forest by his young hunters and brought to Pelototec, who could not see him but knew him at once—for who else could carry that seal?

His name was Pacifico, and he remembered very well everything that happened on the night he helped Pelototec to escape . . . Ah, my little Alvarado—trust you not to miss a trick, I thought. Knowing my story by heart, seeing that the old man was blind, he had saved himself explanations by simply declaring he was Pacifico, rescuer of Pelototec, brother to the Raton, on the run and headed for Contrabono and liberty.

"I gave my brother his want," the old man said. "He go free."

Here a gentleman in glasses said to me, "The Raton have no actual word for freedom. They have one word, *uaxot,* which signifies safety, victory, not being hungry, needing no sleep, having sexual gratification, and well-being in general. Pronounced with emphasis on the diphthong *wa*, it means 'death.' With emphasis on the *axo*, it means 'long life.' Emphasize the *ot*, and you say 'me' or 'self.' "

"*Uaxot,*" the old man said, touching his breast. "*Uaxot!*"

The gentleman went on, "It is contrary to etiquette to let a stranger go, and against taboo to let him stay. So this old person probably feels that he has done the man he refers to a very special favor, keeping him in the family by drinking the ashes of his heart mixed with that palm wine which induces strange dreams. A sort of savage sacrament."

I stammered, "I understood the commandant to say these bones were, so to speak, a passport to safety."

"In a ghostly sense, so they are."

The commandant came in then, and said, "Ah, Pacifico, here's a friend of yours." He ignored Pelototec, beckoned me to one of the racks, and picked up a dried head by its red hair. "There, my friend—he who laughs last laughs best."

"Oh, poor Alvarado!" I said, and covered my eyes. And I cried, "Good God, I am a simple man. If it was, after all, Your will that I be the instrument of Alvarado's doom, was it merciful or necessary to make such an operation of it?"

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The commandant said, "Why, I'd give a year's pay to see a few of my friends' faces on these racks!"

Now I have told you my story. This year the Government declared an amnesty for all prisoners who had served twenty years or more.

The commandant tells me that I am free. I say to him, "Free for what, your excellency? Here I have work, food, drink, tobacco, shelter. Must I go begging on the roads?"

He replies, "My friend, this is not a charitable institution."

So, with all the facts before you, will you have the goodness to help me word an appeal to the governor, asking that in consideration of nearly thirty years of exemplary conduct, and having regard for the fact that I was never guilty of the crime for which I was sentenced in the first place, I be kindly permitted to spend the remainder of my days here?

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

NOT WITH A KNYFFE

by M. EDWARD HOLDEN

A near-sighted hunter named Phyffe
Decided to take his own lyffe,
    So he fired his gun,
    But when he was done,
He'd shot not himself but his wyffe.

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Donald E. Westlake was asked to write a parody of a kind of story that is extremely popular these days, and Mr. Westlake obliged. Remember, however, when you read a parody, no matter how outrageous it may be, that "imitation is the sincerest flattery" . . .

THE MULLIGAN STEW

by DONALD E. WESTLAKE

Preston Mulligan sat in the dark with the shades drawn and the TV turned to the wall. Nevertheless, he sensed that he was being watched. "I'll call the exterminator again in the morning," he mused, eyes glinting.

The phone rang.

A strong man of early middle age, Preston Mulligan kept himself in shape with daily workouts of handball, tennis, jogging, mahjongg, and backgammon.

The phone warbled.

Today a respected Washington attorney with one of the large firms down on Pennsylvania Avenue (he could never remember which one, but it didn't seem to matter—he'd enter an office at random, make a few phone calls, reject a supply contract for muddy wording, and on Fridays his paycheck would appear in the mailbox), years ago Preston had worked briefly for BNX, the undercover arm of TPP, the covert organization within the CIA.

The phone whistled.

His jungle experiences during that time had left him with a slight limp but strong memories of brave men defying the elements and one another.

The phone shouted, "Hey, you!"

"Quiet," Preston said, eyes flaring. "I'm mentally surveying my history till date."

"It's a phone call," the phone said. "Important. For you."

"Oh, very well," Preston said, eyes weary. But when he picked up the receiver, the hiss of gas told him, too late, it had been a trap. In .67 of a second, he had been rendered unconscious.

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Within the deep mahogany walls of the Mahogany Club, an apparently lavish exclusive club for rich and powerful men, was concealed the headquarters of the CFTC, a lavish exclusive club for rich and powerful men.

"Gentlemen," Thrum said, "be seated."

Crash crash crash thud thud crash thud crash crash crash crash thud thud crash thud crash crash thud thud thud crash crash crash crash crash.

"You understand," the President said, "the reasons for absolute secrecy."

"Absolutely, Mr. President," Preston Mulligan said, eyes narrowing. "But can you tell me nothing at *all* about my mission?"

"Only this," the President said. "The fate of the entire human race hangs in the balance."

"Mulligan is getting too close," Thrum said. "I know it goes against our principles, gentlemen, but I'm afraid Mulligan must be—eliminated."

"Preston! That car!"

"I see it," Preston said, eyes grim. "Hang onto your hat, Lewis, this is going to be a wild ride."

"Oh, yes, sir, the General's out. I packed him a nice lunch, and he went off for a hike along those cliffs. Sir? Sir?"

"Hurry, Lewis! Pray God we're not too late!"

"Neck broken," the doctor said. "Obviously an accident."

"But we'll need to know a bit more," the police officer said, "before we can let you gentlemen go."

"But there's no time!" Preston hissed, eyes clenched.

"Sergeant," Lewis said, handing the policeman a small white card, "national security is at stake here. Phone that number, and you'll understand."

"Oh, I will, will I?" Skeptically the policeman retired to the other office. Soon he returned, significantly reaching for his handcuffs. "That phone number," he said significantly, "has been disconnected."

"Lewis! Look out!"

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"That was meant for me, Sergeant," Preston said, eyes hard.

"I have only your word for that," the policeman said.

"Sorry, I have to do this, Sergeant," Preston said, eyes moist, as he struck the policeman down with the scythe. Leaping through the window, kicking the twin orphans out of the MG, he made good his escape.

"It all began," Preston said, eyes farfetched, "when an old friend from my Burma days called with an incredible story. A super-secret organization, the Committee For The Crisis, was on the move; no one knew whose side they were on, or what they planned to do."

"Go on," Laura Cartwright said, voice husky. An astonishing ash blonde, Laura had been a Washington fixture for years. Apparently merely a legwoman for a TV network news department, Laura in fact held in her hands threads leading to a thousand hidden Washington secrets. She might have sold that knowledge for millions, but she wasn't interested in money; her concern was for something finer—power.

Preston had known Laura for years. After their torrid love affair several years ago in Karachi—while changing planes—they had remained good friends. Now it was to her snug apartment in the Watergate, furnished exclusively in Oriental rugs, that he had naturally turned for sanctuary.

"Since," Preston continued, eyes sharply focused, "I perfectly matched the complex membership profile of the Committee For The Crisis, I was the logical one to infiltrate the organization and find out what was going on. The President himself spoke to me—"

"The President *himself*?" Laura asked, voice quavering.

"Later, it turned out the President too might be implicated. A ring I'd noticed on his finger was the symbol by which members of the Committee recognized one another."

"The President *himself*?" Laura asked, voice rising and falling.

"It was possible, of course, that he too had infiltrated the organization, for reasons of his own. But what if the Committee were actually involved in *good*? Dam-building along the lower Gobi, for instance, or food-parcel distribution in Guatemala. In my determination to learn the truth I apparently attracted attention. There have been several attempts on my life."

"Preston!" Laura said, voice rich with emotion. "Were you hurt?"

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"I've been incredibly lucky," Preston acknowledged, eyes twinkling. But then his eyes hardened: "And I've also learned the truth. The Committee For The Crisis is involved in one of the most massive conspiracies the world has ever not known!"

"Preston!"

"It's true, Laura. You understand the principle of cloning—"

"Yes."

"—parthenogenetically creating a new human being—"

"Yes, I know that, Preston."

"—from just one cell of an existing human being—"

"I've read the literature on the subject, Preston."

"—so that the new being is identical with the original—"

"I *know*."

"—except, of course, without the original's memory. With, in fact, a blank mind, ready to be filled with whatever its creator chooses. Well, Laura, that's what's happening here. It's incredible, but true. Within a huge underground laboratory-dormitory beneath Kennedy Center—and I find it significant that every single worker on the construction of Kennedy Center has either died an unnatural death or not—the clones are being prepared to *take over the world*!"

"Preston," Laura said, her voice weak with terror, "you can't mean—"

"I do. The world's most powerful human beings, all are being systematically replaced. Senators, Generals, vast industrialists, flinty bankers, Dick Clark, world-renowned sports figures—" Preston leaned closer, eyes half shut. "The President himself."

"The President *himself*?" Laura asked, voice snapping in two.

"Not only that, the original clones have turned on their masters, destroyed them, made clones of *them*, and now the Committee For The Crisis itself is completely manned by clones! Clones cloning clones, and ever more clones cloning ever more clones. I have myself just escaped from a circus clown clone and *two* Rosemary Clooney clones! Humanity must clean out this clan of clones before we decline, or it'll be too late!"

"I'm sorry, Preston," Laura said, her voice vibrant, "but it *is* too late."

Preston stared at the tiny gun in Laura's tiny fist, his eyes huge with understanding. "Laura— you mean—?"

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a *NEW* Morley-Bakov story by

STEPHEN WASYLYK

The septuagenarian sleuths of the Golden Age Retirement Center, Inc.—Morley and Bakov—are back in full swing. And what does it take 75-year-old Morley to come out of placid retirement? Very little—only the sight of a pregnant young woman "walking strangely." From that simple beginning it is only a step-by-step investigation to bank robbery and murder. . .

THE DELIVERANCE OF CLABO PENDER

by STEPHEN WASYLYK

Morley and Bakov had settled in their favorite deck chairs on the patio fronting the red brick building of the Golden Age Retirement Center, Inc., their field glasses dangling from their necks.

The warmth of the sun that added a sheen to Bakov's bald head had made him drowsy. His eyes were closed, his hands clasped over his ample stomach. Seemingly as relaxed, Morley's alertness was revealed only by the quick, birdlike flicking of his blue eyes as he surveyed the mid-morning scene.

Things were normal. The manager of the small antique shop up the street had arrived promptly fifteen minutes before nine, clutching his latest acquisition, a battered brass lamp of uncertain vintage; the parking-lot attendant had already dented three cars; the doorman of the expensive new condominium directly across the way was surreptitiously sipping coffee behind a potted evergreen; and the vehicular traffic flowed and stopped at the command of the traffic light on the corner, and the pedestrians, most of whom confined themselves to the other side of the street, moved briskly on their mysterious errands.

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And then Morley sat up a little straighter.

On the sidewalk beyond the head-high wrought-iron fence at the foot of the broad lawn of the Center, the figure of a young woman had caught his eye. Like an exhausted runner determined to finish a long race, the woman would plunge forward, head down, for a few brisk steps, then her head would gradually rise and her steps would slow until she almost stopped before the head tilted forward again, seeming to give her the impetus to move a few feet more.

Morley raised his field glasses with one hand while nudging Bakov with the other.

Bakov snapped awake, disoriented, looking from left to right wildly.

"Look, Bakov," whispered Morley.

"At what? At what? Where is the fire?"

"There is only a young woman who is walking strangely."

Bakov's eyes came back into focus and followed Morley's pointing finger. He raised his glasses. "That is indeed a strange way to walk, even for a pregnant young person," he said.

The young woman had staggered and stopped and had clutched the wrought-iron rail for support. Several people passed, eyeing her curiously but giving her a wide berth.

Morley leaped to his feet and flipped the strap of his field glasses over his head. "Get the nurse person, Bakov," he snapped.

Bakov opened his mouth to reply but Morley, his bushy iron-gray hair bouncing, his Hawaiian shirt flapping around his thin frame, was trotting down the long driveway quite briskly for a man of 75. Bakov waddled quickly past the stares of the other residents on the patio toward the main entrance of the Center and the nurse's small office.

When Morley reached the young woman, she was resting her head against the fence, eyes closed, clutching two black iron pickets for support, her hands white with strain, her face pale except for the deep shadows under her eyes. Her hair was long and brown and parted in the center. She wore a simple print dress and a soft jacket, and as Bakov had noted, was obviously pregnant.

Morley touched her shoulder reassuringly. "Do not worry. The nurse person will be here in a minute."

The young woman's eyes opened and her head lifted proudly. "He's innocent," she said. She released the fence, took a step, and started to collapse.

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Morley wrapped his wiry arms around her and desperately looked back over his shoulder to see the nurse rapidly propelling a wheelchair down the driveway, followed by a lumbering Bakov and a stream of other residents.

His voice strained, Morley whispered into the unhearing ear of the young woman. "For a small pregnant person you are indeed very heavy. I think you will have at least the quadruplets."

Morley stepped into the corridor, closed the door of the nurse's office, and raised his arms to the assembled residents in a reassuring benediction. "It is not necessary to worry. The pregnant person is not ill and the baby is not yet ready to investigate the world. The young lady is only very hungry and tired because she has had no food and sleep. The director and the nurse will take excellent care of her."

As the residents drifted away, Morley took Bakov's arm and pulled him aside. "The young woman is in trouble, Bakov."

"What trouble? Did you not just tell the residents—?"

"None thought to ask why such a person should have no food or sleep so that she faints in the street, although this is a very peculiar thing. Let me tell you, Bakov. The pregnant person has no money because some evil criminal stole her purse last night as she left the police station."

"Police station? She does not look like a criminal."

"How can a pregnant person be a criminal?" demanded Morley. "It was because Lieutenant Hook, the homicide person, arrested her poor husband for robbing a bank and killing a guard. She sat up all night in a bus station because she was afraid to walk the street. This morning she did indeed walk all the way to their apartment but the cruel landlady locked her out because the rent has not been paid, so she started to walk back to the police station when she fainted in front of the Center. Is this not trouble?"

"It is not a time for dancing," agreed Bakov. "But trouble is to be expected if the husband is a vicious criminal."

Morley shook his head. "She says her husband is innocent."

"It is very unusual for a wife to say her husband is innocent," said Bakov solemnly. "In my seventy-five years, never before have I heard of such a rare thing."

"Do not make jokes, Bakov. I promised the pregnant person we would save her husband." He pulled a small photo from his shirt pocket. "Here is his picture. You see, it is not an evil face."

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Bakov looked down at the attractive features of a young man with a straight nose and dark curly hair.

"That is true," he said. "But the face means nothing. If vicious criminals looked like vicious criminals, the police could easily put them all in jail and it would be safe to walk the streets again." He sighed. "It is unfortunate that criminals very often look like ordinary persons. It makes things very complicated."

"That is good philosophy, Bakov," said Morley, "but the philosophy is for old persons who have nothing better to do than sit and talk and explain the world to each other. Let us go see Lieutenant Hook and ask why he has made such a terrible mistake."

Bakov shook his head. "You are crazy, Morley. I say this not in anger but in sadness. Did not Lieutenant Hook promise to put us in jail for interfering the next time we interfered? Are there not the government agencies now to take care of people with trouble like the pregnant person? They will give her money and a place to live. They will even give her husband a lawyer. What can we do that the government cannot?"

Morley stood with folded arms for a moment. "I will tell you, Bakov." He walked to the nurse's office and opened the door slightly. The sobs of the young woman were soft and trembling. Morley closed the door.

"We can hear her weep," he said. "Can the government hear her weep?" He placed an arm over Bakov's shoulders. "Let us go talk to Lieutenant Hook."

Bakov rubbed his fleshy jowl thoughtfully. "Perhaps you are right, Morley. But it is now time for the mid-morning tea and little cakes and I am hungry."

"You are always hungry, Bakov."

"That is true," said Bakov, "but if I am to go to jail because of a weeping pregnant person, it will not be on an empty stomach."

They descended from the bus at the stop in front of the police building, a large structure with many windows, mounted the steps to the front door, and in a few minutes were walking down the hall in the Detective Bureau toward a glass door marked *Lt. Hook*.

The man at the desk inside was short and heavy, his straight dark hair low on his forehead. Seated in a chair alongside was a well-dressed young man with a full head of curly hair that would

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some day resemble Morley's iron-gray thatch.

Morley tapped at the door and pushed it open.

Hook lifted his head, saw them, and half rose. He pointed down the hall. "Get out," he said wearily.

"We are citizens making an inquiry," said Morley.

"Put it in writing and I may get around to it in six months," said Hook.

"It is the law," said Morley. "If a citizen makes an inquiry, the police must cooperate."

"Only if the inquiry is legitimate and not for the purpose of harassment. You fail to qualify."

"What is this legitimate?" asked Bakov.

The young man smiled benignly. "A reporter, for instance, has a legitimate purpose."

Morley reached into his shirt pocket and proudly extracted a folded sheet of bright yellow paper. He smoothed it flat and pointed at a typewritten line. "I am a reporter for the *Golden Age Salute*."

Hook's voice scaled upward. "What the hell is the *Golden Age Salute*?"

"It is a newspaper for the people at the Center."

Color rose in Hook's face. "Goodbye, Mr. Morley. Did you hear me? *GOODBYE!*"

"Wait a minute," said the young man. His voice was condescending. "Mr. Morley, the area of interest of the *Golden Age Salute* hardly encompasses police business. It's a newsletter of items of personal interest to the residents."

Morley drew himself up. "Is not the fainting of a penniless pregnant person before the Center of interest to the residents? Would they not like to know why the police have arrested the husband of this person who even now sits in the nurse's office and weeps?"

"Who is this pregnant pers—woman?" asked the young man.

"Her name is Melodie Pender and her husband Clabo Pender was arrested yesterday. I have come to the conclusion he is innocent."

Hook sat down and supported his head with his hands. "Why me?" he whispered to himself. "Six detective lieutenants and it's always me."

The young man stood up. "Mr. Morley, what evidence do you have that Clabo Pender is innocent?"

"He shouldn't have asked," muttered Hook into his hands.

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"His wife says he would not do such a thing," said Morley.

Hook's knuckles turned white.

The young man smiled. His voice was amused, each word stressed as though he were speaking to a child of dubious intelligence. "I thought for a moment you had some logical reason for the matter to be investigated further, a view also held by Lieutenant Hook for some obscure reason. You have no evidence, Mr. Morley. My name is Harold Gruber and I'm an Assistant District Attorney, so I know full well what constitutes evidence, a point I have been trying to impress on the Lieutenant.

"Yesterday afternoon a branch bank in center city was held up by a lone gunman. This bank has a main entrance on Chestnut Street and a rear entrance on Sansom Street. As the gunman was retreating toward the Sansom Street entrance, the guard reached for his gun. The robber shot and killed the guard and ran out. The bank manager, who is braver than I am, hesitated only a few moments before picking up the guard's gun and running after the killer. A few doors away on Sansom Street he found the man sprawled on the ground where he had evidently tripped and fallen, the revolver and the bag of money alongside him.

"The manager held the man until the police arrived and positively identified him as the one who held up the bank. The man was Clabo Pender. Now *that* is evidence, Mr. Morley. We know the difficulties Pender has been having. Unemployed, a pregnant wife, in the city for only a few weeks, his application for assistance lost somewhere in the bureaucratic recesses, down to his last few dollars. *That,* Mr. Morley, is *motive.* There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that Pender is guilty and I will recommend a stiff sentence. I think you have enough information for your paper, so I suggest you go home and leave these things to professionals who are equipped to handle them."

Bakov sighed. "That is indeed good evidence, Morley."

Morley faced Gruber. "And what does Clabo Pender say about all this good evidence?"

"He claims he was walking up the street, intending to answer a classified ad in the paper, when a man came running out of the bank and crashed into him. They both fell. The man picked himself up and ran, leaving Pender on the ground."

Morley spread his hands triumphantly. "It is obvious. The bank manager has made the mistaken identity."

"Hardly, Mr. Morley." The amused tolerance in Gruber's voice

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was clear. "After all, he did see the man in the bank, and furthermore there was absolutely no one else in sight, running, walking, standing still, or otherwise. It is a very narrow street, so he could hardly be mistaken. There is simply no place where another man could have disappeared."

"Perhaps he leaped into a car and drove away rapidly. I have seen this many times on the television."

"That is true," said Bakov. "Criminals always drive away very fast on the television, although the heroes always drive away very fast also. It was very confusing to Miss McIlhenny until I explained that criminals always drive big black cars while heroes always drive small sports cars with big fat tires."

Gruber shook his head. "No car either, Mr. Morley."

"Nevertheless," said Morley, "if Clabo Pender said there was another man, then it was so. It is only necessary to find him."

Gruber's irritation showed in his voice. "Lieutenant Hook also seems to share this strange compulsion to doubt the word of an upstanding, reliable witness like the manager—"

"The manager, the manager," interrupted Morley impatiently. "What did he see? He saw a man lying down with a gun and a bag of money. Was he to stop and say, aha, perhaps this is not the robber, so I will look around? No. He would not take his eyes from the person he believed was the vicious criminal. And did the police look when they arrived? For what purpose? Did they not already have someone to arrest? So the real criminal escaped. But do not worry. I will go find him so that you may put him in prison and release Clabo Pender to the bosom of the pregnant person who is his wife."

Hook had leaned back in his chair, a slight furrow in his forehead, rolling an unlit cigar thoughtfully in his fingers.

Gruber opened his mouth but Hook stopped him with an upraised hand. The frown was gone and there was a gleam in his eyes.

"Don't say anything," he told Gruber. "You don't know these two. I do. There is simply no use in talking to them." He pointed at Morley and Bakov. "It's a free country and I can't stop you from going where you please and talking to people, so go and do whatever you feel must be done."

Morley and Bakov exchanged puzzled glances.

"You do not intend to put us in jail?" asked Bakov.

"You have committed no crime," said Hook.

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Bakov tugged at Morley's arm. "Let us leave before he changes his mind."

As they walked down the hall, Hook beckoned to a tall young detective in a gray suit.

On the sidewalk Morley stopped. "It is very strange that the bank manager says Clabo Pender was the man who robbed the bank. Surely, when he saw him lying on the ground, he could see it was not the same man, even though he was surrounded by the money and the gun, yet I do not think a bank manager would lie."

"That is true," said Bakov. "Managing a bank is an honest position and the manager would have no practice like a politician."

Morley clasped his hands behind his back and paced back and forth. At the doorway of the police building the tall young detective leaned against the wall and lighted a cigarette.

Bakov watched Morley for a few minutes. "If you are picketing the police building, you do not have the sign that says the police are unfair."

"I am only thinking," said Morley. "I cannot understand the mistaken identity of the manager."

Bakov's eyes longingly followed a passing bus. "Can you not think while sitting down? It is almost time for lunch at the Center."

Morley straightened. "We cannot yet go back to the Center because we have not found the guilty person. Let us walk to the scene of the crime. I will think while walking."

Bakov's voice was suspicious. "How far is it to this scene of the crime?"

"Not far, Bakov. Many years ago I once worked near this bank although in those days it was not the scene of a crime. It was only a bank with pleasant people."

As they crossed the street, the young detective followed.

They ambled through the city, Bakov pausing occasionally to examine merchandise displayed in shop windows, enjoying himself thoroughly since their trips into center city were not too frequent.

He paused at a woman's specialty-shop window in which a plastic female mannequin, frozen in mid-stride, was dressed in a business suit complete with vest and tie and hand-held briefcase, the mannishness of the suit relieved only by a few soft feminine touches.

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Bakov nudged Morley, who had stopped, his hands thrust into his pockets, his brow furrowed as he wrestled with the problem of the bank manager's identification.

"Can it be true that it is now proper for a woman to dress like a man?" asked Bakov.

Morley looked at the mannequin, then at the variety of garb on the passing pedestrians. He sighed. "Tell me, Bakov, when has it not been that a woman dresses as she pleases?"

Bakov considered the figure in the window. "I do not think it is intended that men and women should look alike," he said darkly.

They had walked a few more steps when Morley straightened, smiled, and said, "AHA!" so loudly that several passersby looked at him.

"I know this *Aha,*" said Bakov. "We are in trouble."

"Not us but the evil murderer, Bakov." Morley came to a sudden halt and pointed at the twin glass doors of the small branch office of one of the city's largest banks. "We are here."

Bakov went up to the doors and peered into the unlit interior through his cupped hands. "I think it is closed," he said.

"That is what the sign says," said Morley. "It is understandable because of the death of the unfortunate guard. Come, let us look in the back where they captured Clabo Pender."

They retraced their way past the specialty shop, Bakov shaking his head at the mannequin in the display window. At the rear of the building the narrow street was cobblestoned and partially blocked by a large truck pulled up on the sidewalk unloading merchandise at the receiving door of the specialty shop.

On the opposite corner was a small drug store, its plate-glass window completely papered with colorful, hand-lettered signs promoting discount prices on a variety of merchandise from aspirin to deodorant.

Morley led the way around the truck.

The rest of the street functioned mainly as access to the service doors of the buildings on either side, containing only a few retail establishments, all of which were at the far end beyond the small, sedate rear entrance to the bank. It was clear that if the killer had turned to his right after he left the bank, he might have been seen by someone in those stores, but if he turned to his left, he probably would have been seen by no one if the steel delivery doors were closed, the covered windows in the drug store also masking him from the view of anyone inside, and in a minute or

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two he could have appeared to be nothing more than an innocent pedestrian.

"Aha," said Morley. "It is understandable why the bank manager saw only Clabo Pender."

He suddenly turned and strode past the truck again, catching the trailing young detective in the gray suit by surprise, the detective nonchalantly pretending to study the signs in the drugstore window.

Followed by Bakov, Morley stepped through the door of the drug store.

It was typical of a dying breed of small corner drug stores in the city that were being forced out of business by discount chains, by the introduction of personal care and medicinal products to the shelves of large supermarkets, and by gunmen more in search of drugs than cash. The store was narrow, a counter against one wall, a prescription counter at the rear, the merchandise displays leaving little room to walk.

Near the door a stout gray-haired woman with a rotund pleasant face above a white turtleneck that contrasted with a pink pants suit stood at a cash register behind the counter, nibbling at a bar of milk chocolate. On one side of her an inclined rack displayed a huge assortment of candy bars, gum, and cough drops while on the other an even larger rack was filled with cosmetic preparations, health aids, and convenience items.

The woman smiled at Morley. "Can I help you?"

"We are investigators looking for the evil person who killed the poor bank guard yesterday," said Morley.

She donned the spectacles dangling from a silver chain around her neck and looked at him closely. "Investigators? For policemen you look old enough to have retired twice, so you must be a couple of private detectives who can't make it on Social Security like the rest of us, so you have to keep working. However, I'm a Gray Power advocate and we senior citizens have to stick together. Ask your questions, although I must tell you I've already told the police I saw nothing. I didn't even know anything had happened until the police cars arrived."

"You noticed nothing unusual at all?" asked Morley.

"Nothing," she said. Her head tilted toward Bakov, who was eyeing the displayed candy hungrily. "Listen," she said, "keep away from that stuff. It will do you no good." She held up the half-eaten bar. "I know."

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"The diet person does not allow him to eat candy," said Morley.

"That makes sense," she said. "He's carrying enough flab for two people already." She ignored Bakov's glare and patted her ample waist. "I've put on twenty pounds since I first started working here, but what can I do?" She bit off another piece of milk chocolate. "My son-in-law is the pharmacist who owns the place. For a son-in-law he has better than average intelligence. When my husband died, my son-in-law knew I'd better get out of that empty house but who would hire me at my age, even though I needed the money? So he suggested I come here because he needs someone reliable behind the register. But I don't know which is worse—to stay at home and starve to death while going bonkers watching daytime television or come in here and nibble candy all day which is nothing more than a physiological reaction to the fact that I hate the damned job."

"That is unfortunate," said Morley, "but it is better to keep busy as long as one is capable."

"Is that why you are investigators?"

"Mostly we are residents of the Golden Age Retirement Center, Inc." Morley explained about Melodie Pender and her husband.

"That poor girl," she said. "I wish I could help. Where can she go now? I'm sure she can't stay at the Center."

"I do not know," said Morley. "It is in the hands of the nurse person and the director. They are skillful people and will find her a home."

"Look," she said excitedly, "why can't she come in with me? I have this big house and no one in it. She's welcome to stay as long as she likes."

"That is an excellent idea!" Morley's face fell. "But even such a nice home would not make her happy if her unfortunate husband is not with her. So we must find the murderer. Perhaps you noticed something and do not remember."

"I remember." She finished the candy bar and dusted her hands. "Yesterday was a slow day. I was even glad to see Bernie, that wise kid who delivers the *News,* even though I don't like him much because he always drops them with a crash and has no respect for his elders. I guess he brought in the papers about five minutes before the police arrived. I took the first one and hadn't even finished Ann Landers' column when I heard the sirens."

"He was here at the time of the excitement?"

"I saw his van leave just as the first police car pulled up."

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"So the police did not speak to this Bernie?"

"I think not."

Morley frowned. "I would like to talk to this newspaper person."

She glanced at her watch. "Well, he should be walking in any minute with the afternoon edition. I may not like him but he is very prompt. Look, while you're waiting, I'll call the Center and see what the director has to say about my idea. What's the number?"

Morley told her. She dialed a phone on a ledge beneath the counter and was still talking when brakes squealed outside. In a few moments a dark-haired young man entered with a bundle of newspapers on his shoulder and dropped them with a thud that shook the floor. He glanced at Morley and Bakov and then with annoyance at the woman on the phone, snapping his fingers at her.

"I'm in a hurry, Mrs. Longstreet," he said.

Morley stared at him, then reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out the photo of Clabo Pender, and held it up alongside the young man's face, his eyes shifting from one to the other.

Bernie pushed his arm away. "Just what do you think you're doing, you old fool?"

"Saving an innocent person," said Morley. "Now I see why the bank manager made such a mistake. You are indeed almost a twin of Clabo Pender." He pointed an accusing finger. "You held up the bank and killed the unfortunate guard, then you ran outside and bumped into the unlucky Clabo, leaving the money and your gun on the sidewalk in your desire to escape. You leaped into your van and drove away."

Bernie edged toward the door, smiling coldly. "You're as flaky as the old broad behind the register."

Morley blocked his path. "We shall see when the police arrive."

Bernie thrust him aside and dashed for the door but Bakov casually thrust out a leg, tripping him. Bernie catapulted through the open doorway to fall at the feet of the young detective in the gray suit who was lounging outside.

The young detective, whose short career had already inured him to flying bodies, looked down at Bernie with a resigned boredom.

Morley joined him. "You may arrest him," he said. "It will give you something useful to do instead of wasting the taxpayers' money following us." He turned to Bakov, who was leaning

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against the doorway, standing stork-like on one leg, his hands clasped around the raised shin of the other.

"He kicked me," said Bakov painfully.

Bakov waved airily. "It is a small price to pay for catching a vicious criminal. You should be happy, Bakov."

Bakov caressed his injured shin. "Such happiness I can do without."

"You are forgetting, Bakov. We have captured the criminal and there is yet time for lunch at the Center."

The pain forgotten, Bakov lowered his leg and smiled happily.

Late that afternoon they sat again in their deck chairs, watching the day's activities in the street wind down. The antique dealer was raising his awning in preparation for closing, a good many of the cars in the parking lot had departed with their dent-resigned owners, and the doorman of the condominium was lurking behind the potted evergreen, nipping at the contents of a small plastic flask.

"It was generous of Lieutenant Hook to take us to lunch at that nice restaurant," said Bakov happily. "He did not even care what I ordered."

"Why should he care?" asked Morley. "He is not the diet person, who when she finds out what you have eaten will give you only the water for three days. And did we not deserve it? Homicide persons must be very careful of sending an innocent person to prison, as must District Attorneys like Harold Gruber."

"Still, I did not think Lieutenant Hook would ever do such a nice thing as take us to lunch," said Bakov reflectively. "Or even send the young man in the gray suit to protect us if we found the murderer."

"That is what he said when I told him the young man requires many more lessons in following people without being noticed, but it was all because he desired to make Harold Gruber look foolish if we solved the puzzle. I do not think Lieutenant Hook likes Harold Gruber."

Bakov chuckled. "He laughed very hard at Harold Gruber's red face when you explained that sometimes the evidence is not as important as the person. Harold Gruber would not listen to the Lieutenant when he told him this because young people like Harold Gruber are certain they know everything. Some day he will be a very important person."

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"Ha," said Morley, "it was obvious that the only way the bank manager could have made the mistaken identity was if the real criminal looked like Clabo Pender. It was you who were responsible, Bakov. Did you not say it is not intended for people to look alike?"

Bakov stared at him. "I spoke of men and women. Bernie is not a woman."

Morley sighed. "It does not matter, Bakov. It was also because of the newspaper van that everyone was fooled. One does not think of a criminal driving away in a newspaper van, only in a big black car that roars loudly." He spread his hands. "No one notices newspaper vans. That is why the evil Bernie thought he could rob the bank safely."

Bakov frowned. "It is strange that two faces that look alike should belong to such different people. Clabo Pender is a nice person and he and his wife Melodie are happy now because they will live with Mrs. Longstreet, and Clabo will take her job in the drug store so she may stay at home and help Melodie and not be required to eat candy."

"Persons like Mrs. Longstreet are happy only when they are looking after people, not cash registers," said Morley. "But it was obvious that even if Bernie was not the exact twin of Clabo Pender, he was guilty. He has the shifty eyes. Evil persons always have the shifty eyes."

"That is true," said Bakov. "I have noticed this myself right here in the Center."

Morley sat up. "In the Center? Who?"

"The diet person," said Bakov.

"Q"

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a *NEW* detective story by

RON GOULART

Scrib Merlin's only ambition in life was to be a comic in show business. He would do anything to break in, to get a chance to make people laugh—at the Joke Box Club, on television, anywhere. He would even play detective and track down the murderer of his idol and best friend. He would even solve a dying comic's dying message . . .

NINETY-NINE CLOP CLOP

by RON GOULART

He came staggering into the dressing room, stumbled against a chair, skidded, stepped into the waste basket with one foot, clomped, fell down, and started to die. His expensive suit was splotched with dirt.

"Jockey, are you kidding?" Scrib Merlin was alone in the communal dressing room of the Joke Box Club when Jockey Metz staggered in and tumbled down. Stuffing his stack of file cards into his jacket pocket, Scrib scooted to the older comedian and knelt beside him.

Jockey was a small man, in his middle sixties, and nearly bald. It was evident up close he'd been worked over and thoroughly beaten. There were welts and bruises on his face and scrawls of dry blood. His hands were in even worse shape, with one finger obviously broken and two of the nails gone.

Scrib thought he knew what had happened. "Jockey," he asked, lips close to the dying comedian's swollen ear, "were they after—"

"Scrib," Jockey managed to gasp, his eyelids flickering. "Scrib, maybe you . . . take over . . ."

"Okay, sure, be glad to, but—"

"Ninety-nine clop clop," said Jockey in that familiar high voice of his. Then he died.

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"What?" Scrib grabbed him by his narrow shoulders and shook him. "You've got to give me more than that, Jockey. You're one of my idols, an inspiration since I was—damn!" He shook the dead man a few more times before letting him drop to the straw floor mat.

Scrib rose, sucking in air, and shook his head. He absently slipped a hand into his pocket and fondled the packet of routine cards. "Better call the police," he decided.

"I can see where that would be very depressing to you," said lovely blonde Texas Blender from across the table. "I'm more used to that sort of thing because of my work and I doubt if I'd—"

"Used to dead men walking in and falling over at your feet?" Scrib scowled.

"I've been on 'Mercy Hospital' for three seasons. I guess that gives me a pretty thoroughgoing knowledge of life and death and—"

"Soap," he said. "I'm talking about real life."

"To a great many people 'Mercy Hospital' is real life." Texas glanced at the few patrons scattered around the late afternoon pub. "You ought to see the mail I receive, Scrib, addressed to me as though I really was an anesthetist. People with all sorts of problems which—"

"Which call for an anesthetic, sure." He drummed his fingers on the table top.

"You're very grouchy today."

Scrib watched a pair of advertising men playing darts at the other end of the dim pub. "Sorry," he said finally. "It's just that I'm very down. Things were going badly even before Jockey Metz dropped dead right in front of me."

"It's like the proverbial straw which breaks the camel's—"

"You've been babbling soap dialogue too long, Texas. It's made your brain—"

"Good thing I'm fond of you." She put a hand over his nervous fingers. "You're being very irritable today."

"I know, I'm sorry." He shook his head. "I've been really busting my brain on my new comedy routine, to try out at the Joke Box. I was figuring to go on last night. I was signed up and Lanza said he'd give me another chance if I had new material. Then Jockey comes in and dies and the police arrive and I had to answer questions for half a dozen stock guys who need shaves

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and . . . " He sighed forlornly. "I lost my turn."

"New comics are trying out at the Joke Box every night, except Sunday," said the girl. "I'm sure Lanza will fit you in again next week sometime. The important thing is to forget about poor Jockey so you—"

"No, that's exactly what I don't want to do." He leaned toward her. "Jockey's been my best friend for years, my mentor sort of. If it hadn't been for him I wouldn't even have got the chance to try out at the Joke Box the first time. Because Lanza didn't really care for my type of material."

"You've got talent. I know that. Sooner or later—"

"Later looks like the time," said Scrib. "Look, I'm twenty-eight. I've been trying to break into comedy for eleven years. This is as far as I've come."

"You'll get your chance. It's the people who hang in there and—"

"Doing dumb clerk jobs, living on unemployment half the time, scrounging," he recited. "Having to polish my damn act into shape in my spare time, begging people for a chance to show what I can do. Damn it, Texas, I *know* I'm a comedian. If I'm not . . . then I'm nothing."

"You *are* a comic, of course you are. I think you're very funny," she told him. "And Jockey thought so too."

Frowning, Scrib said, "I don't know if he did. Sometimes I got the idea . . . well, I had the feeling he was sort of stringing me along. Almost making fun of me. I don't know, I guess he really liked me. He liked to talk to me a lot, about his career, his life, his wives. I'm going to miss the guy."

"This may not be the time to mention it," said the girl, "but I never thought Jockey was that terrific. Yet he did dozens of specials for NBC, had his own show for three seasons, and you saw him on 'Tonight' and Merv and he practically lived on Larry Finger's 'Now' show. I think if Jockey could make it, you sure can."

Scrib glanced around, hunched, and lowered his voice. "This is confidential," he said. "But I think, in recent years anyway, part of Jockey's continued success was due to the fact that . . . well, he had something on somebody."

Texas' eyes went wide. "What do you mean? He was blackmailing somebody?"

"Don't holler it," Scrib cautioned. "But, yes, blackmail. He hinted at it more than once. 'Face it, kid, I'm a second-rate comic,'

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he'd tell me. 'But I've got one hell of an ace in the hole.' " His voice went quieter. "Texas, I think that's why they killed him."

"The person he was blackmailing?"

Scrib nodded. "I figure it this way. The police are certain Jockey was worked over and tortured. Somehow he managed to get away from whoever had him, managed to come tottering to the club and me. He must have known I'd be there and could help him."

"He should have gone to a hospital instead."

"Maybe the Joke Box was closer, maybe he was so far gone he wasn't thinking straight."

Texas said, "Why'd they torture him? Just to be mean?"

"To make him talk," he answered. "Obviously he had some piece of physical evidence on whoever it was he was blackmailing. Could be his target got tired of paying after all these years and hired some people to make Jockey tell where the incriminating stuff was hidden."

"A photograph," suggested Texas. "I bet it was a picture."

"Yeah, Jockey was a camera buff. He had half a dozen of them in his room at the Troupers Club."

"We have no way of knowing if he did talk."

Scrib shook his head. "Don't think so. He gave me the impression his secret was still a secret."

"He talked to you before he died? You didn't tell me that."

Edging his chair nearer to the girl, he said, "I didn't tell anyone."

"But you ought to tell the police."

"Jockey was my closest friend. I'm not about to tell them I think he was a blackmailer and that he got knocked off by one of his victims. Wouldn't look very good in his obit."

"It might help them find out who killed him."

"I can do that," Scrib assured her. "I've got a pretty good mind for analyzing things. You have to if you're a comedian."

Her pretty face took on a look of concern. "No, that's dangerous, Scrib. You can't do any—"

"Suppose I figure out who Jockey was blackmailing. Then I, very subtly, drop a hint to the police," he said. "First, though, I get rid of anything which might hurt Jockey's rep. Then I nudge the cops in the right direction."

"Motive," said the girl. "Without the blackmail motive, why are the police going to think this particular person did Jockey in?"

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"I can hint that this guy threatened Jockey and I just now remembered it, that it might be a good idea if they checked his alibi, inquired if he'd hired any goons. Million ways to handle it."

"All of them dangerous."

"Give me credit for being able to be sly."

"Okay, but how are you going to find out who Jockey was blackmailing?" asked the girl. "Or is that what he told you before he died."

"He didn't name names, no. He was able to give me a clue, though," said Scrib. "It was a dying message. All I have to do is figure out what it meant and I'll have the whole business solved."

"What," she carefully inquired, "was the dying message?"

He jiggled his chair farther around the table. Closer to her he said, "Ninety-nine clop clop."

Her face stayed blank for a few seconds, then a smile touched it. "That's silly. That can't be what he said. I mean, what kind of last words are those?"

"This isn't a funny situation, Texas." He jiggled his chair away from her.

When she stopped laughing, Texas said, "Okay, forgive me. Do you have any idea what he was talking about?"

Scrib studied his lap. "Not at the moment," he admitted.

It came to him a night later, near midnight.

Scrib was alone in his small apartment in the West Eighties, watching Larry Finger's 'Now' show. This was a favorite talk show of his, one which showcased a lot of comedians and had helped launch some of the most successful. A successful tryout at the Joke Box might, eventually, lead to a spot on 'Now.' From there it would be onward and upward.

Sitting in his lopsided wicker armchair and making infrequent notes for his routine on a pad of yellow lined paper, Scrib absently watched the television screen. He had a sudden unplanned insight. "A joke," he exclaimed aloud. He stood up so rapidly that his pad fell to the worn rug. "A joke," he said, clapping his hands together. "That's what Jockey was telling me—part of an old joke."

Scrib circled his small bedroom-living room. He actually smacked the heel of his hand against his temple, the way people did in old movies to get themselves to thinking, cudgeling his

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brains. "Sure, he was like Berle and Henny Youngman, he knew thousands of jokes. Used to brag about how many—a joke for every occasion, a joke on every subject. So he's dying and his mind isn't in the best of shape, but he wants me to understand something important. What's more natural for an old comic than to use an old joke."

Fine this far. Except Scrib couldn't force himself to remember what the rest of the joke was.

"Somebody with a cane? No, and it isn't the little-old-lady-sick-upstairs switch." Muttering, he made a wider circle of the room. He wandered over to his alcove of a kitchen. Sometimes a cup of coffee helped him think better.

When he reached for his nearly empty jar of instant coffee a large cockroach came scurrying out from a patch of shadow next to the jar on the shelf. Scrib automatically reached out to flick the bug into oblivion. He didn't. He put the jar down with a clack on the stove top.

"Bug," he said, excited. "Joke about a bug. Yeah, that's it. You're getting warm. Cockroach? Nope. Fly in the soup?" He shut his eyes, his lips pressed tight. "Caterpillars? Something like . . . centipedes! 'Who goes ninety-nine clop clop? A centipede with a wooden leg.' That's the joke!"

He spun and did a jig in the confined space of his tiny kitchen. He'd remembered, he'd got the joke Jockey Metz had been trying to tell him when he died.

All at once Scrib ceased celebrating. He realized that, although he knew where Jockey's dying words came from, he still had no idea of what they had to do with the blackmail operation.

He went back to his wicker chair, returned the notepad to his lap, and started making notes.

"It helps you think."

"It helps me wheeze. Hey, is there a gag there? 'My girl says jogging makes you fit, but me it makes wheeze.' Not quite right. Maybe a play on fit. 'She says it keeps you fit. I tried it and, sure enough, I had a fit.' Naw, still not good enough."

"We're supposed to be thinking of other things," Texas reminded him. Clad in a scarlet warmup suit, the lovely blonde girl was jogging effortlessly along a Central Park path.

It was a warm clear Saturday morning. Scrib, in his regular weekend outfit of sneakers, khakis, and an ancient pullover, was

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trotting beside the girl, breathing through his open mouth. "Okay, I agree Jockey wasn't trying to give me the name of who he was blackmailing," he said, gasping in air between every few words.

"A caterpillar with a wooden leg wouldn't have much money."

"You're always accusing me of being sarcastic, whereas it's you, Texas, who—"

"Suppose he wasn't trying to tell you a darn thing? It's possible all dying comedians mutter old jokes as they depart this life." Her blonde hair flicked rhythmically as she ran.

Avoiding a sprawled drunk, Scrib said, "You're missing the whole and entire significance of dying messages. They're intended to convey something. That's the sole purpose of a dying message, no matter how cryptic."

"Where he stashed the pictures or whatever," she suggested. "Could Jockey have been trying to tell you that?"

Scrib brightened. "Hey, you've got it," he said. "Sure, that's what he meant. He wanted me to find the stuff, to avenge his death. So he tried to tell me where it was hidden."

"Did he have any friends with wooden legs?"

"You were at his funeral with me yesterday. Did you see anybody like that?"

"Without pulling up trousers one can't always be sure."

A scruffy terrier joined them in their run, nipping at Scrib's heels. "Go away, scram!" he said. "Somebody with a wooden leg. It would have to be somebody famous for having a wooden leg."

"Long John Silver."

"Quit kidding around."

"I meant someone noted for playing Long John Silver, an actor," said Texas. "Most of Jockey's friends were in show business."

"You're right," said Scrib. "In fact, he even used to go out to Long Island once a month to put on shows at the Coldport Actors Home. I went with him once and did my act, but those older people don't seem to care much for contemporary humor. They really loved Jockey, though, and—" He halted on the path.

The terrier caught up and made another try for Scrib's leg.

After helping scare him off, Texas asked, "Why did you stop running all at once?"

"One of the old guys at the home. He was even in the show with us. Well, several of them were, but this one guy . . . he was in vaudeville and then on TV back in the early days. He was still

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on once in a while when I was a kid." His head was nodding vigorously up and down. "This guy—"

"Has a wooden leg?"

"No, no. He's a ventriloquist. Maybe you remember him. Kenyon and Bugsy. Get it? Bugsy is the nitwit dummy's name. What is a centipede? A bug. And what is this dummy but a bug with a wooden leg."

Texas arched one eyebrow, considering. "You think possibly Jockey hid whatever it is inside the dummy?"

"I think it's worth a drive to Coldport, Long Island, to find out," Scrib said.

"Dead? He can't be dead."

"It is often difficult to accept the death of a loved one, but nevertheless—"

"When?"

"Only two days ago," answered the plump gray-haired woman in the gray pants suit.

Scrib gave an unseeing glance at the chill white lobby of the Coldport Actors home. "He died of natural causes?"

The director of the home frowned. "Mr. Kenyon was in his eighties," she said slowly and carefully. "He passed away quietly in his sleep. I do think it might have been partially due to the shock over the death of his old friend, Jockey Metz." She studied Scrib's face. "You came here with Mr. Metz at least once, didn't you?"

"Couple of years ago."

"You ought to visit again. They love entertainers here."

"I had the impression my type of comedy material didn't—"

"What," put in Texas, dressed in a tweed skirt and cable-stitch pullover, "what became of Mr. Kenyon's personal effects?"

"Oh, he had nothing in the way of possessions."

"We were wondering about that marvelous dummy of his," persisted the girl. "Bugsy."

The plump woman touched at the corner of her eye with a knuckle. "It's a very sentimental thing," she said. "Somewhat unusual as well, but I got all the interested parties to agree. Mr. Kenyon has no immediate relatives, so I had only to persuade the mortuary and they—"

"Wait," said Scrib, stiffening. "You're not trying to say the dummy was buried with old Kenyon?"

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"Yes, that was his last request. It was little enough to do for him, poor man."

"When was he buried?"

"Oh, the funeral isn't until Monday," said the director. "So if you'd care to pay your last respects you'll find him at the Plaut Brothers Funeral Home on Wharf Lane. It might be nice to drop in before you go back to Manhattan."

"Yes," agreed Scrib. "Yes, we'll pay our last respects."

"It's not graverobbing," explained Scrib. "Graverobbing is when you dig somebody up with a shovel."

"Okay, but it's the next closest thing," said Texas. "They call it, technically, being a ghoul."

"Nobody's been arrested for being a ghoul on Long Island lately," he told her. "Besides which, we're not disturbing the body. We're only going to disturb the dummy."

"You're going to, I'm staying out here."

They were parked on a tree-lined side street, watching the rear of the funeral parlor from Scrib's rented car. It was a few minutes to midnight.

"We haven't seen any cops go by all the time we've been here," Scrib said. "The last employee left half an hour ago. I'm going to make my move, Texas."

"What we should have done," the girl said, folding her arms, "is gotten hold of the dummy while we were in there pretending to view the remains."

"Too obvious."

"I could have distracted both Plauts while you frisked Bugsy."

"Not with the organist watching."

"She wasn't going to rehearse forever."

"This is the best way," he assured her. "I stuck that matchbook in the side door of the room Kenyon's in. All I have to do now is sneak inside."

"It still sounds unwholesome." She shivered.

"A wooden dummy, what's unwholesome about that?"

"The dummy happens to be lying there with that dead old man's arm around it."

"Listen," he said, "Jockey was murdered a week ago, beaten to death. He's dead and buried and the police haven't a notion of who did it." He pointed in the direction of the dark funeral home. "I think the answer is inside that place. I'm going after it."

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"All right." She patted his arm. "Be careful, honey."

"Sure." He eased silently out of the car, and keeping in shadows as much as possible he made his way to the side of the white wooden building. There were no cars passing through this part of Coldport at this time of night.

The door still had the matchbook preventing it from closing completely. He pushed the metal door, listened at the narrow opening. He pushed harder and entered. There was thick flower-scented darkness all around him.

Tugging out the flashlight he'd bought at a hardware store that afternoon, Scrib clicked it on.

The coffin sat on a cart at the front of the small chapel-like room—an inexpensive coffin surrounded by only three small floral pieces. He hesitated a few seconds before striding up to the casket.

He tried not to look directly into Kenyon's wrinkled old face. Balancing the light on the shut portion of the coffin lid, Scrib got hold of the dummy, pulled hard, and got Bugsy up off the satin pillow.

Retrieving his flashlight, Scrib squatted beside the casket and inspected the dummy. He held it by the shoulders and shook. Something rattled faintly. He brought Bugsy closer to his ear and shook again.

"Left leg." He crouched on the padded steps, rested the dummy on his lap, and pulled up its checkered trousers leg. "Yeah, there."

Along the pink-painted leg a faint crack was visible. Scrib inserted his thumbnail and made the crack widen. He fiddled a bit more and the two joined halves of Bugsy's leg came apart.

A small paper cylinder fell out. Tossing the dummy on its back, Scrib scooped the cylinder off the rug. It was composed of three photographs and three negatives, wound round with a rubber band.

Holding the flashlight between his knees, he unfurled the pictures. There were three separate shots, taken at short intervals, aboard a yacht, showing a lean blond man in the act of shoving a struggling dark-haired girl over the side and into the night sea.

"Damn, it's Larry Finger," he said out loud. "The host of the 'Now' show."

Scrib figured it this way. The girl in the pictures was a model named Donna Klay, who had supposedly committed suicide in

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1967 while on a yacht party. The boat belonged to Larry Finger and among the other guests had been Jockey Metz. That much Scrib got from the accounts in the library's microfilm files of the *Daily News*.

But Donna, rumored to be a girl friend of Larry Finger's, hadn't taken her own life. Finger, who had been earning over $200,000 a year as far back as 1963, had killed her. Killed her without ever realizing Jockey was nearby with one of his cameras. Funny about Jockey. He'd chosen to snap pictures instead of trying to save the girl. He must have realized, in an instant on that dark deck, it would be more lucrative to have the pictures. The pictures would assure him an income for the rest of his life.

Scrib had nothing like that in mind. He knew exactly what he wanted. After he'd told Texas there had been nothing hidden in the dummy and that he might as well give up the search for Jockey's killer, he set out to get an interview with Larry Finger.

That took him nearly three weeks, but he finally managed to see the 'Now' host alone. He gave Finger one of the pictures and one of the negatives. He promised he'd hand over the other photos and negatives as soon as Finger gave him what he wanted.

Finger agreed.

Scrib had it all worked out. He knew, always had, that once he was exposed to a large audience he'd start really succeeding as a comic. So that was all he asked of Larry Finger. Not money, not a lifelong income, but only a chance to do ten minutes of his own comedy material on the 'Now' show.

Finger gave him that chance.

There was only one thing Scrib had overlooked.

He wasn't funny.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Captain Leopold story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

It is almost impossible to believe, but the Internal Security Division was investigating Captain Leopold, head of the Department of Violent Crimes. Captain Leopold! Suspected of conduct detrimental to the Department! No way. At least, that's what Sergeant Connie Trent believed. But there was the persistence with which Captain Leopold was pursuing the Benthoff case, and it was true—everyone seemed to know it—that Leopold had a personal vendetta against Benthoff. . .

CAPTAIN LEOPOLD ON THE SPOT

by ***EDWARD D. HOCH***

Detective Sergeant Connie Trent sat across the desk from Lieutenant Peter Hayden and wondered what was on his mind. Hayden was tall and ruggedly handsome at 35, with a deep prosecutor's voice more suited to a courtroom lawyer than to an investigator for the Department's Internal Security Division. He had a reputation for going after cops who took bribes, cops who pocketed the money or drugs seized in a raid. Nobody liked Peter Hayden, though until that moment Connie had never formed an opinion one way or another.

"How long have you worked for Captain Leopold in Violent Crimes, Connie?" he asked smoothly, as if making conversation over cocktails.

"Let's see—close to six years now," she replied, knowing that he certainly had her records in the closed file before him.

"You get along well with him?"

"Sure, he's swell to work with."

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"And I suppose you have a deep loyalty toward him."

Connie was beginning to feel uneasy. "Look, what is this? Don't tell me you suspect Captain Leopold of taking a bribe? He's just about the most honest man I've ever known!"

Peter Hayden smiled uneasily. "I can assure you it's nothing like that."

"Then what is it?"

"Internal Security delves into other matters as well. Some very serious charges have been made and it's my job to investigate them."

"Charges against Captain Leopold?"

"That's correct."

"But he's the best man in the Department! You must know that the rate of convictions on his cases is remarkably high."

Hayden picked up a pencil and began running his fingers nervously along its shaft. "That's just the trouble, Connie. The charge is that he's been faking evidence, that he finds someone he thinks is guilty and doctors the facts to assure a conviction."

Connie Trent was stunned. "I can't believe that!"

"Of course you feel that way. It's only natural. Look, I'm not saying he ever sent an innocent man to prison. We don't think he did. I'm only saying that in some cases he may have invented evidence and changed his own records to bring about a more certain conviction of the guilty party. His goals may have been admirable, but that doesn't condone his methods."

"I still don't believe it."

"I'm asking you to help us prove or disprove it. In the long run you might end up clearing his name."

"You want me to spy on him?" The idea appalled her.

"I want you to keep your mouth shut and your eyes open. I'm not asking you to tell me anything except what you think I should know. For the good of the Department."

"I see."

"I'm counting on you, Connie."

"Which case is it that especially concerns you?" she asked, more out of curiosity than because she intended to help him.

"The Benthoff affair. We're looking into some of the trial testimony now."

She nodded. "You know he's still investigating Benthoff since the acquittal."

"Exactly. It's become a personal vendetta with Leopold, just as

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it was with the other defendants who were convicted. They may all be guilty as sin, Connie, but we can't put them behind bars on trumped-up evidence. Do you understand that?"

"Certainly."

"Good girl! That's all for now. Just remember to keep your eyes open."

Connie Trent left the office with a feeling of weakness in her knees. Her first reaction was to tell Leopold everything, to warn him what they were up to. Surely he'd never doctored evidence or testified falsely, not even to put someone like Sam Benthoff behind bars.

She'd tell him.

Right now.

But at the door of Leopold's office she discovered he had a visitor. Dr. Lawn Gaylord, the brown-haired young pathologist who'd helped Leopold on a poisoning case a year or so earlier, was seated in the visitors' chair by his desk. Connie had a feeling Leopold had taken her to dinner a few times, but this was her first visit to his office.

"Yes, Connie," Leopold said, interrupting a conversation that had Dr. Gaylord giggling in an unprofessional manner. "Something I can help you with?"

Connie retreated a few steps. "No—no, it was nothing. I'll talk to you later, when you're free."

She went back to her desk, sat down, and started typing up the daily reports.

Leopold's feelings toward Dr. Lawn Gaylord were a mixture of friendship and paternalism. He was barely old enough to be her father, but he'd reminded himself on their first date that it was a far more likely relationship than anything more intimate. He liked making her giggle in a most uncharacteristic way, liked talking over his cases—and hers—late at night. In short, he liked being with her.

He was not one to pretend it could be anything more. After one failed marriage and a brief unhappy love affair, Leopold was a man who looked life in the eye and knew exactly where he was going. The years after 50 would grow increasingly lonely, but he had his work. He had Fletcher and Connie for friends. And now he had Lawn Gaylord. Why she bothered seeing him, even as rarely as she did, was something he tried not to dwell on. Cer-

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tainly a woman as charming and intelligent as Lawn could have had her choice of the doctors at Parkside Hospital. But perhaps like him she wanted only a bit of relaxation without the inevitable tensions of a serious affair.

"So this is your office," she'd remarked as she entered. "Somehow I expected a much larger room, full of clattering teletypes and wanted posters."

"We keep those downstairs." He remembered, in that instant, the first time he'd asked her out. She'd been attacked and injured while helping him on a case, and when she was released from the hospital he felt a dinner was the least he owed her. Somewhat surprisingly she had accepted.

"I wouldn't ordinarily bother you here, but I was downstairs applying for a pistol permit."

"What for?"

She pushed the brown bangs back from her eyes. "I've been a little edgy ever since my experience last year. I don't want to go through that again. With a pistol in my handbag I can relax a bit when I come down to get my car late at night."

"Do you know how to shoot it?"

"I've been taking lessons."

He smiled and shook his head. "You never fail to amaze me."

She glanced at her watch. "Are you free for lunch?"

"I think so. Fletcher's on vacation, but our case load isn't too heavy at the moment. Let me check with Connie."

He went out and found her at her desk, typing with more vigor than usual. "Connie, can you spare me for an hour or so?"

"Sure," she said without looking up.

"I should be back before two."

He slipped into his raincoat and followed Lawn into the damp February air, wondering vaguely what was wrong with Connie.

Connie herself could not have stated her feelings in words. She only knew that Leopold was in danger and she felt helpless to aid him. She'd known for months that trouble was brewing over the Benthoff case, though she hadn't known until her meeting with Hayden that the departmental investigation might touch Leopold.

Sam Benthoff was an auto salesman turned cocaine dealer. But what brought him to Leopold's attention was not the narcotics business but a stolen-car ring that resulted in at least one murder. Benthoff was certainly involved in the ring, but whether he

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had a hand in the killing of Sonny Smith was still open to question.

Sonny's body had been found in the trunk compartment of one of the stolen cars when the police raided a junkyard where autos were being cut up for their valuable parts. The police and newspapers liked to call the places "chop shops." When they found his body, Sonny Smith hadn't been chopped, but he'd certainly been punctured a number of times—stabbed in the chest and back, then shot through the head for good measure.

Sam Benthoff and two other men were arrested and charged with the murder, accused of killing Sonny Smith in a disagreement over his cut of the profits. Captain Leopold had headed the investigation, and Connie had to admit he shared some responsibility for what happened next. As it turned out, Benthoff had been under surveillance by detectives from the narcotics unit attempting to link him to a large cocaine buy. This information was revealed during the pre-trial hearings, and Benthoff's attorney subpoenaed the surveillance records in an attempt to provide his client with an alibi for the time of the killing.

Actually the records seemed to do just the opposite. They showed that detectives had followed Benthoff to the vicinity of the "chop shop" at about the time of the killing, which could only be established within a period of six or eight hours. Leopold felt that surveillance reports were enough to convict Benthoff.

But when the case came to trial, the Benthoff prosecution was seriously hurt by the revelation that the narcotics team's reports had been altered. They had not followed Benthoff to the junkyard after all. Leopold was furious when the judge instructed the jury to return a verdict of Not Guilty against Benthoff. "Hell," he stormed, "a killer goes free because some Narcotics cop was sleeping in his car instead of following him like he was supposed to!"

The other two men were convicted, but Benthoff was back on the streets. It was a cloud that Leopold still hadn't shaken off. People like Hayden attached some blame to Leopold himself, and Connie knew that Leopold would do almost anything to get Benthoff back behind bars. Still, the conversation with Hayden had upset her more than she realized. To suspect Leopold of tampering with evidence was something she couldn't even imagine.

She skipped lunch, plunging into her paperwork with a nervous energy she'd rarely known before. When she heard Leopold's voice and realized it was already two o'clock she was amazed.

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That was when the phone on her desk rang.

"Sergeant Trent, Violent Crimes," she answered.

"Connie Trent?" It was a man's voice, speaking softly. For an instant she thought it might be the beginning of an obscene phone call.

"Yes," she acknowledged.

"This is Herb Matters. You probably don't remember me."

"I—"

"When you were an undercover cop with the narcotics squad, six years ago, I used to give you information."

"I remember." Herb Matters had never *given* her anything, but he'd sold her some valuable tips. He was a little man, prematurely gray, who moved about the fringes of the underworld selling numbers and gathering information.

"Still in the market?" he asked.

"I've been out of Narcotics for years."

"This is something especially for you. I read the papers. I know your boss Leopold wants to nail Sam Benthoff."

She cut in before he could say any more. "Where can I meet you?"

"How about the bookstore in the Harbor View Mall? In an hour?"

"I'll be there."

"Connie—"

"Yes?"

"It'll cost you two hundred."

"We'll see what it is first," she replied and hung up.

Herb Matters had always liked meeting her in bookstores, she remembered. It wasn't so much that he had an interest in literature, but rather that they were less likely to be spotted by people who knew him. "I run into people I know everywhere," he'd told her once. "In bars, laundromats, cigar stores—everywhere but in bookstores." He hadn't changed much, either in appearance or mannerisms, since she'd last dealt with him six years earlier.

"You're better-looking than ever," he said, smiling to show the gap of a missing tooth. "Your new job must agree with you."

"Tell me what you've got on Benthoff." She picked up an oversized book and pretended to be browsing.

"He's making a big cocaine buy tonight, from a man named Wringer."

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"Where?"

"You know the city's waste treatment plant, down by the Sound?"

"Yes."

"Wringer works there. The stuff comes in by small boat and Wringer hides it in the sewage treatment tanks till he's ready to sell it. Tonight at nine Benthoff is meeting him there."

"How much is involved?"

Herb Matters shrugged. "Benthoff is paying him fifty grand, so the street value's got to be a hell of a lot more than that—a quarter million by the time it's cut."

"All right," Connie said. "We'll take care of it."

"What about my money? That's worth two hundred."

She took an envelope from her purse and slid it between the pages of the book. The money had come from the informants' fund, and it would be her responsibility if the tip proved to be false.

"Thanks, Connie," he said, taking the book from her. "See you around."

She walked out of the store and headed across the mall to her car. It was really a job for Narcotics, but she knew she owed it to Leopold to tell him about it.

Leopold listened to what Connie was telling him, listened while he looked out at the city streets growing dark in the afternoon's early twilight. He was glad that spring was only a month away. Though it hadn't been a snowy winter, the short days and dreary skies still depressed him.

As Connie finished he swiveled around to face her. "Is this fellow Matters trustworthy?"

"He always was when I was in Narcotics."

"Why did he call you with this tip instead of Narcotics?"

She hesitated, then said, "He knew Benthoff beat that murder rap. He thought you'd be especially interested in the information. And two hundred is more than Narcotics would have paid him."

"I see. Have you told them about it?"

"I had to tell them I was meeting him to get the money."

He turned back toward the window. "I want to nail Benthoff, Connie. You know that."

"Sure, I know it. But you can't do anything foolish."

"Foolish?"

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"I— Never mind. I just meant with all that trouble about the false testimony."

He nodded. "That was Narcotics again. Damn it, Connie, I don't want to bring them in on this! I want to nail Benthoff good and clean this time, with no slip-ups."

"Still, it's a Narcotics case," she pointed out.

Leopold sighed. "Yes, it is. And with Fletcher away we'd need someone to help us anyway. Who can you trust in Narcotics?"

"Chuck Thomas was my partner when I worked for them. He's good and he doesn't make mistakes."

"All right," he decided. "Bring Thomas along to keep it all according to the regulations. Then we're going to get that damn Sam Benthoff."

Chuck Thomas was a rugged young man in his early thirties, not much older than Connie. Leopold had always liked him, though this was the first time he'd worked with him on a case. "What do you know about the sewage treatment plant?" Leopold asked as they drove along the north shore of Long Island Sound. Connie was driving and Leopold was by her side, half turned in the seat to speak with Thomas.

"Not much except it's got a foul odor. The neighbors are always complaining. Can't imagine anyone hiding valuable coke in a place like that."

"It would be in a waterproof package, of course. Turn here, Connie. We should take the back route."

It was a dismal place by night, with rows of open tanks reflecting the bleak moonlight and reminding Leopold somewhat of a fish hatchery. As they moved along the fringes of the place he checked his watch. "Twenty minutes to nine. I don't see either one of them."

"It's early yet," Chuck Thomas said.

"We'd better split up," Leopold suggested. "We don't know from which direction they'll come. We don't even know for sure if the cocaine is still under water."

Connie agreed. "Chuck, did you alert the road patrol?"

He nodded. "They've got unmarked cars covering both roads to the plant. Anyone trying to leave will be stopped."

"Good!"

As they separated and Leopold started down the east side of the treatment area, he saw the lights of an approaching car. He

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ducked beneath the concrete rim of one of the sedimentation tanks, hugging the earth as the car came to a stop. The lights dimmed and a figure emerged. It was Sam Benthoff, a bit early for his appointment. Leopold took a deep breath and reached for his revolver.

Benthoff was a tall man who walked with a bit of a lope. He was easy to recognize even though Leopold was too far away to see his face. He moved down between the rows of sedimentation tanks, past the aerator about 50 feet from Leopold, and called softly, "Wringer. Are you there?"

"Over here," a muffled voice replied, and for the first time Leopold spotted a second figure crouched or leaning against one of the treatment buildings. The tall man approached and muttered something Leopold couldn't hear.

Then suddenly he saw Benthoff's hand dart out and the second figure began to fall. To his left he saw Chuck Thomas break from cover and spring toward them. He glanced around for Connie but he couldn't spot her in the darkness.

Wringer was on the ground now, and Benthoff was moving away. "Stop—we're police!" Leopold shouted and started to run.

The tall man must have seen Leopold and Thomas moving in on him at the same instant. For the first time he moved fast, darting back into the shadows to run along the wall of the building. Leopold brought his revolver up, but there was no clear shot.

Behind him he could see Chuck Thomas bending over the body on the ground. Ahead, Benthoff suddenly ran toward the road. But Connie was there, breaking from cover to block his route. She had her gun up in a combat stance, aimed right at Benthoff's middle. "Stop or I'll shoot!" she yelled.

Sam Benthoff stopped.

He raised his hands as Leopold came up behind him, and tried to throw something toward one of the sedimentation tanks. "I'll take that," Leopold said, grabbing his wrist.

"Hell, it's Leopold again!"

"That's right."

"You're really out to get me, aren't you? One way or another."

The object in his hand was a gravity knife—a switchblade that could be opened by flicking the wrist downward. "I'll keep this," Leopold said. "Let's go back and see what you've been up to."

They met Chuck Thomas on the way. "Wringer's been stabbed," he said. "He's still alive, but just barely."

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"Call an ambulance."

Leopold hurried to the dying man while Connie snapped a pair of handcuffs on Sam Benthoff. She was informing him of his rights when he interrupted. "I didn't do it. I didn't stab him."

Leopold turned from the body. "I saw you do it, Sam. This is one rap you won't beat. If Wringer dies we've got you for murder."

Blood had run down the front of Wringer's shirt and pants, even staining his shoes. It took Leopold a moment to get at the wounds in his chest and try to stanch the flow. The man was unconscious and very near death.

"He was already stabbed when I got here," Bentoff insisted.

"Then why'd you try to get away? Why'd you want to throw away your knife?"

"Because I knew you'd pin it on me! Give me a chance, will you?"

"Sure," Leopold said. "The same sort of chance you gave Sonny Smith."

They transferred Benthoff to a patrol car and Chuck Thomas rode with him to headquarters while Leopold and Connie followed the ambulance to Parkside Hospital. "We don't need a dying statement," Leopold said, "but it would be good to have one. If Wringer regains consciousness long enough to say Benthoff stabbed him, I want to be there."

But that was not to happen. As they entered the emergency room an intern came to meet them. "Your man's sinking fast. Sorry."

"No chance for him?"

The intern shook his head. "Lost too much blood."

Five minutes later Wringer was dead.

By that time Connie had already phoned the Medical Examiner and she brought Leopold the bad news. "Everyone's tied up or out of town. We can't get an autopsy till late tomorrow sometime."

"Damn! I'd like to be sure of that knife before I book him. There can't be any loose ends this time."

That was when Dr. Lawn Gaylord walked into the room. "They told me you were down here," she said. She wore an open white lab coat over a dark sweater and slacks, and both hands were in her pockets. She looked tired.

"Hello, Lawn. You know Connie. We just brought in a murder victim."

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"Thanks for giving us the business!"

He smiled. "Parkside was the closest hospital. I didn't think you'd be here this late."

"I've been running tests all day. Just about to call it quits."

Leopold took a deep breath. "Lawn, could you do something for me? We've got our killer, but I just want to be sure of everything before I book him. Could you take a look at the body, especially the knife wounds, and tell me if this is the weapon that made them?" He held out a plastic evidence bag with the switchblade knife inside.

"What do you want—blood tests?"

"That, and measurement of the wounds. Anything you can do without cutting into the body."

She laughed. "Don't worry, I'm no cutter! But I'm also not a forensic specialist. I'm a pathologist, remember? He wasn't poisoned unless there was curare on this knife."

"I know, and we'll do a proper autopsy tomorrow. But I need this information now. If Benthoff is confronted with it, we just might get a confession out of him."

She considered that for a moment. "All right," she decided. "I'll do what I can. But it'll take me an hour or two for the blood tests. I've got to clean up from the tests I've been running before I do another thing. Will you be at your office?"

He nodded. "I'll be there all night if it means getting Sam Benthoff."

"I'll phone you before midnight."

"Good."

On the way back to headquarters Connie was unusually quiet. Finally Leopold asked her, "Is something the matter?"

"I don't think Dr. Gaylord is the proper person to perform those tests."

"Why not? She did great work on that poisoning case."

Connie turned toward him in her seat and started to reply, then stopped.

"You'll see," Leopold continued. "I'm really going to nail Sam Benthoff this time."

At headquarters Chuck Thomas was waiting for them. "Benthoff had the money on him for the drug buy. Fifty thousand, just like your informant told you, Connie."

Leopold grunted. "Any weapon besides the switchblade?"

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"Nothing, but he was never one to carry a gun. You remember Sonny Smith got it with a knife before they shot him."

"Yeah. I remember."

"Do you have the knife?" Thomas asked.

"He's running some tests on it," Connie said.

"Oh?" The narcotics man shrugged. "Well, I guess it's your case now anyway. I heard that Wringer died."

Leopold sat down behind his desk. "What do you know about him?"

"One narcotics arrest, no conviction. He's not the sort I'd pick for a city employee, but then I don't do the hiring."

"Any sign of the cocaine?"

Thomas shook his head. "I'll have a team out there at daybreak to search the grounds. But maybe there never was any coke. Maybe that's why Benthoff stabbed him."

"Maybe," Leopold agreed.

"Has he made a statement?" Connie asked.

"Just to say he's innocent. I left the formal questioning to you."

Leopold nodded. "Come on, Connie. Let's get at it."

"You'd better wait for his lawyer, Captain," she suggested.

Leopold looked at her, more startled by her tone than by her words. "Of course. Did he phone a lawyer, Chuck?"

"Yeah. Tom Atkinson's on his way over. Benthoff's sticking with a winner."

"Atkinson won't get him off this time."

They waited an hour for the lawyer to arrive, then trooped into the interrogation room where Sam Benthoff awaited them. Leopold sat down across the table from him and came right to the point. "Why'd you kill Wringer, Sam?"

"I didn't kill him."

"Was he trying to cheat on the cocaine deal?"

"I never laid a hand on him."

"I saw you, Sam. I wasn't a hundred feet away and I saw you jab him."

"He was like leaning or propped up against the building. I saw all the blood and I poked him to see what the trouble was. That's when he fell over."

"Sure. Now suppose you tell us the truth."

Tom Atkinson cleared his throat. "My client is telling the truth, Captain. You were a hundred feet away in the dark. You saw nothing."

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"The moon was quite bright tonight," Leopold reminded him.

Sam Benthoff shifted uneasily on his chair. "I swear I didn't kill him."

"If he was already dying when you reached him, how come he spoke to you?" Leopold asked. "We heard him answer 'Over here' when you asked where he was."

"I guess he wanted me to help him."

"The voice that answered you wasn't the voice of a dying man, Sam."

The door opened and a detective poked his head in. "Telephone for you, Captain. Dr. Gaylord."

"I'll be right out."

Leopold reached the phone and heard Lawn's voice on the other end. "Here's what you wanted to know. There are three wounds in the chest and stomach area. They measure 1.8 centimeters, and the width of the knife blade is 1.75 centimeters. That's close enough to say this is the weapon."

"Good! What about bloodstains?"

"The victim's type B. The knife had been wiped clean, but there are a few stains that could be dried blood. I'm testing them now."

"Fine. I'll send a patrol car to pick up the knife."

"No need to. I'll drop it off on my way home. Will you still be there?"

"I'll be here."

He went back to the interrogation room where Sam Benthoff was just finishing dictating a statement. "You still deny it, Sam?" Leopold asked.

"Sure I deny it!"

"I've got preliminary lab results, Sam. Your knife fits the wounds in Wringer's body. And I think we've got bloodstains too."

"You must be crazy!"

"We'll see."

"You're not railroading me, Leopold!"

"Look here, Sam, nobody wants to railroad you. Suppose you talk it over with your lawyer here. He'll tell you the smart thing to do. Give us a confession and the D.A. will probably let you plead manslaughter. Even with three stab wounds."

"Sure he will!"

Connie moved to Leopold's side and touched his shoulder. "Could I speak to you outside, Captain?"

"All right." He followed her out, leaving Benthoff alone with his

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lawyer. "Did Chuck go back downstairs?"

"Yes. He said to call if we needed him."

Leopold perched on the edge of his desk. "All right, Connie, what's on your mind?"

"Captain, I don't know how to say this."

"Get on with it—I'm in the middle of an interrogation."

"Captain, I don't think you're giving Benthoff a fair chance."

"Fair chance! The man's a murderer! Since when do we give murderers a fair chance? The jury gave him a fair chance with Sonny Smith and he got out to kill again!"

She turned away. "I can't talk to you when you're like this."

"Like what? I'm doing my job!"

She was back facing him then. "You've got a personal vendetta against Sam Benthoff, and everyone knows it. Even my two-hundred-dollar tipster knew it." She lowered her voice. "More than that, Lieutenant Hayden knows it."

"Hayden? Internal Security? What's he got to do with it?"

"Don't you see? They think you were involved in faking that trial evidence. He thinks you're out to frame Benthoff again."

"How do you know that?"

"Because—" Her voice was close to breaking. "Because he asked me this morning to report on you."

"Report? You mean spy on me?"

"Yes."

Leopold felt the energy drain out of him. "What have I done wrong?" he asked Connie.

"Dr. Gaylord shouldn't be running those tests."

"She's qualified to—"

"She's *not* qualified! And even if she was, Hayden could say she found what you wanted her to find."

"What do you mean by that?"

"She's your—she's your girl. Everyone knows that."

"My God, Connie, I'm old enough to be her father!"

"You're old enough to be my father too. Maybe that's why I care so much about you."

"Connie . . ."

"Captain, your feelings toward Sam Benthoff have shut your eyes on this case. You see Benthoff with a knife, and Lawn Gaylord tells you it's the murder knife because that's what you want her to tell you."

"I saw more than Benthoff with a knife, Connie. I saw him stab

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that man Wringer."

"I saw it too. I saw a single jab in the dark."

"What in hell more do I need to see?"

"Captain, Captain . . ." She lowered her head, shaking it.

"Stop calling me Captain. What more do I need to see?"

"*One jab!* You just walked into that room and said Wringer had three stab wounds! *Where did he get the other two?*"

Leopold closed his eyes.

They were still there, frozen into silence, when Lawn Gaylord phoned again.

Leopold opened his eyes. "What is it, Lawn?"

"I made a terrible mistake. I realized it as soon as I hung up before."

"What sort of mistake?" Leopold asked.

"Well, first of all, those were rust spots on the knife, not blood. There's not a trace of blood on it anywhere."

"But the size of the wounds—"

"Don't you see? That was my mistake! I looked it up in a forensic textbook after I phoned you. The wounds were a tiny bit wider than the blade, so I figured this was the knife that killed him. But skin is elastic and tries to return to its original size after a puncture. The width of a wound is usually *less* than the width of the blade that caused it. Less, not more! This knife didn't kill that man Wringer."

There was a long pause. Then Leopold said quietly, "Thank you, Lawn."

"For what? For making a terrible mistake?"

"No, for helping bring me to my senses. You and Connie both." And Leopold hung up.

"I'm sorry I talked the way I did," Connie said softly.

"You said what you had to."

"What about Benthoff?"

Leopold sighed. "I hate to turn him loose, but there's nothing we can hold him on."

"Are we sure? Maybe he had a second knife that he managed to throw into one of those tanks."

"Connie, you're being as bad as me now. You're the one who pointed out that Benthoff only jabbed at Wringer once. And there's more conclusive evidence besides that—evidence I closed my eyes to, until now. They told us at the hospital that Wringer had lost a great deal of blood from those three small wounds. That

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implied a long period of time. And I saw the blood too—down the front of his shirt and pants, and even on his shoes. He couldn't have bled that much if he'd fallen to the ground immediately after Benthoff stabbed him. It meant he was bleeding while he was propped up there, before Benthoff came along. It meant Benthoff told the truth for once in his life."

"But the voice we heard call to him—"

"—could only have belonged to the real killer, hidden somewhere in the shadows."

"So we're back to a murder without any suspects."

"On the contrary, Connie. Don't you see? This business of propping up the dying man, luring Benthoff over to the body—what was the purpose of it? If the killer wanted to murder Benthoff too, for the money, he could have done it without pretending Wringer was still alive. No, the whole thing was a carefully staged scene, played for an audience. And we were the only audience. The killer had to *know* we'd be watching, or his scheme to frame Benthoff wouldn't work."

"But only you and I and Chuck knew we'd be there. And none of us could have—"

"You're forgetting one person, Connie. Your tipster, Herb Matters."

"Matters!"

"It explains why he bothered to contact you after six years, why he wanted you and me there instead of Narcotics. He was planning to kill Wringer and frame Benthoff for the crime. And just reading the newspapers had told him I'd be the perfect witness. He knew I'd jump at the chance to get Benthoff back behind bars."

"Can we prove it?"

"If we move fast and get lucky. He would have killed Wringer for that package of cocaine. If he thinks he's safe he'll still have it with him. If we find him with that package, the lab should be able to prove it was hidden in a sewage sedimentation tank for some time. I think I could prove that with my nose."

Connie hurried to put out an alarm for Herb Matters. Leopold walked back into the interrogation room where Benthoff and his lawyer waited. Atkinson was on his feet. "I demand my client's immediate release, Captain!"

Leopold waved his hand. "You've got it. Get him out of here."

The lawyer's mouth dropped open. "What?"

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"You heard me. Your man got lucky this time. Get him out."

Sam Benthoff was on his feet, smiling. "I beat you again, didn't I, Leopold? When you going to learn to lay off me?"

"Never, Sam."

At the door the tall man paused. "I had a lot of money on me—fifty thousand dollars. Where is it?"

"We want to check that money a little further," Leopold said. "You come down tomorrow and we'll talk about it. Now get out of here."

He watched them hurry down the corridor, then Leopold walked slowly back to his office. It was past midnight and he wanted to go home, but he waited until Connie returned.

"We got lucky," she said. "A patrol car picked up Matters at his apartment. He threw the cocaine out the window as they came in the door. It's still in its original waterproof package."

He smiled at her. "What are you going to tell Lieutenant Hayden about all this?"

"I'll tell him you're still a damn good cop."

"Q"

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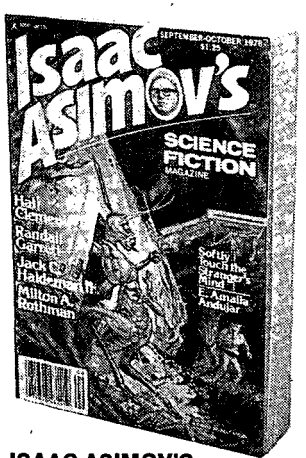

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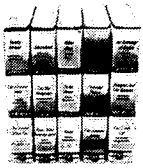

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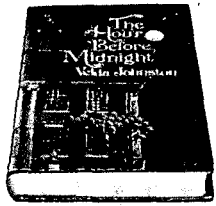

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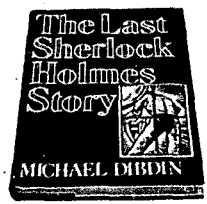

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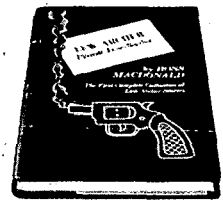

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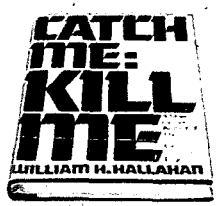

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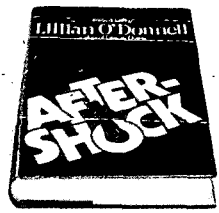

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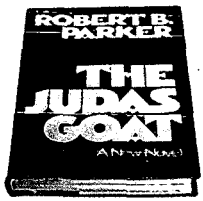

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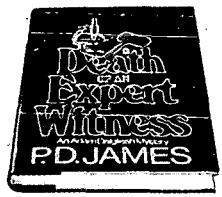

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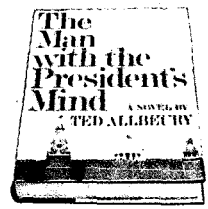

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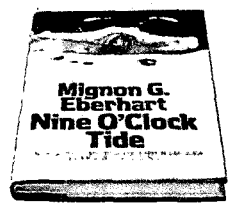

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See Inside Cover for Details.

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